Aesthetics and Narrative Techniques in Dalit Autobiographies

Cane is crooked, but its juice isn’t crooked
Why be fooled by outward appearance?
The bow is crooked, but the arrow isn’t crooked,
Why be fooled by outward appearance?
The river is twisting, but the water isn’t crooked.
Why be fooled by outward appearance?
Chokha is ugly, but his feelings aren’t ugly.
Why be fooled by outward appearance?

(Abhanga 52 by Chokhamela, qtd. in Zelliot, 2005, 8)

I

The necessity of theorizing Dalit literary criticism has been felt by the dalit-writer critics since 1976 Dalit literary conference of Nagpur. R.G. Jadhav, a literary critic, in the conference, presented an actual understanding of the development of literature formulating a theme of social awareness and an aesthetic outlook. Social content and aesthetic form are inseparable in any literary work. The autonomy of a literary work as a work of literature should be granted, however, when a theme of social awareness is presented in a proper literary form, it assumes significance. Dalit literature remarkably comprises a considerable amount of the themes of social awareness. Though, in literary criticism, it seems that the content-oriented and form-
oriented positions are separate, in actual criticism they go hand in hand. Social and formal aspects are blended in a literary work and such blending is organic otherwise both the purposes are susceptible to defeat. Jadhav suggested the idea of Dalit aesthetics as:

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

He further argues that Dalit world is deeply immersed in the struggle of life, and the actual Dalit world is filled with dreadful, terrible and humiliating events. As he writes:

Dalit writers cannot escape being tied physically and mentally to this world. Dalit writers are doing the difficult work of portraying this life, through personal experience and empathy, absorbing it from all sides in their sensibility to live this life is painful enough; it can be equally painful to recreate it on the mental level. (Ibid 310)

The contestation that Dalit writers, such as Daya Pawar and others, make before the mainstream Indian writers is that the high caste writers did not bother to look at Dalit life – even with blinkers. Daya Pawar, in his poem “Oh! Great Poet”, interrogates the great poet, Valmiki, who sings in praise of Ramarajya, “Oh Valmiki… how then should we call you a great poet?”(in Anand 132). Pawar contests the claim of epic quality of Valmiki’s work as he had not written even one stanza about the injustice and repression of the Dalits. So the penetrating expression of agony and oppressed social reality of the Dalits is an inherent constituent of Dalit literature.
Janardan Waghmare, in his essay “Black Literature and Dalit Literature”, makes a comparative study of the two literatures from historical and ideological points of view. He describes that only after the World War I, American Black literature made a real progress. During the period between 1920 and 1930 various facets of the Blacks’ artistic achievement were manifested. It was the time when young writers in the form of ‘new Black’ came to the forefront. Langston Hughes, a poet and novelist, representing the young Black writers delivered the manifesto of Black literature:

We the younger Negro artists, who create, now intend to express our dark skinned selves without fear or shame. If White people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it does not matter. Now we are beautiful. (qtd. in Waghmare 2009, 318)

Thus the Black writers began to portray their life in their own characteristic language. From that time they abandoned the idea of white washing their black skins and minds. In the 1940s and 1950s some remarkable literary works were produced in America such as Richard Wright’s novel, Native Son (1940) that depicted the ghetto life in Chicago and in 1952 Ralph Ellison’s famous novel, Invisible Man was published that depicts three and half centuries of Black life. The Black writers have taken about forty to fifty years to evolve such a revolutionary stance while the Dalit literature emerged primarily under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambekar in the 1930s, and it brandished in the 1970s and 1980s.

M. N. Wankhade in his presidential address, later published as a critical essay, “Friends, The Day of Irresponsible Writers is Over”, in the conference of Dalit Writers expresses his view on the aesthetics of Dalit literature as man being at the centre of Dalit literature. He criticised the romantic nature of Indian mainstream
writers, who were the proponents of ‘art for art’s sake’, developing a great gulf between people and writing. To quote him:

Beauty became the only aim; form and style became of paramount importance, and content was thrown to the winds. The notion developed that the writer writes for himself. As a result there developed in the literary world small, mutual admiration circles of writers and poets who wrote for themselves. The writing that came out of these groups was characterized by escapism, theme of sex and depravity and a sense of meaninglessness of life. (Dangle 329)

According to him, beauty is a relative concept and not constant or eternal. Beauty as a concept is related to the thoughts prevailing in respective ages. There was a time kings were the subject of literature and not the common people but today, the life of the slums and untouchable quarters have become the subject matter of literature. There is an intimate relationship between literature and myths and the Dalit writers are trying to writing about their own myths and stories of their own heroes or Viranganas to evolve a narrative tradition specifically associated with the Dalit identity (Ibid 329).

II

Aesthetics, as a branch of philosophy, deals with the nature of art, beauty and taste, with the creation and appreciation of beauty. Scientifically, it is defined as the study of sensory or sensori-emotional values and also called judgements of sentiments and taste. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English (1992) defines aesthetics as “a set of principles of good taste and the appreciation of beauty” (19).
Leo Tolstoy in his book *What is Art* (1898) defined art from the point of value judgement. He observes:

Art is a human activity consisting in this that one consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings, he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them (qtd.in Goswami 222).

His concept of the value of art is based on the value of empathy that shared for good feelings

Noel Carroll in his book *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (2001) notes that the art object is something which is designed to provoke a certain form of response and a certain type of relation. The canonical relations with art (object) involves the aesthetic however that is to be characterized. So to him, the “artwork is an object designed with the function of engendering aesthetic experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and so forth” (Carroll 5). He observes that much has been said by Kant and Hutcheson about theory of art, but in real they are not the theory of art rather they are the theories of beauty. He writes:

Though Kant and Hutcheson say a great deal about art, their theories are not theories of art. They are theories of beauty - and, in Kant's case of the sublime as well. But they do not propose anything remotely like definitions of art. (*Ibid* 31)

Giles Deleuze, on the other hand, argues that art does not produce concepts, though it does address problems and provocations, rather, it produces sensations, affects, intensities, as its mode of addressing problems (see Grosz).

During the period of late 17th to the early 20th century Western aesthetics underwent a slow revolution into what is often called Modernism. German and
British thinkers accented on beauty as the key component of art and of the aesthetic experience, and perceived art as necessarily aiming at absolute beauty.

For Kant beauty is a disinterested manifestation, a truth by itself and it is so on account of our judgement. Moreover beauty is ‘universal’ and ‘necessary’ implying the objective and detachment of beauty valid across all spatio-temporal contingencies. Beauty, in the scheme of Kant, is only seemingly or affectively purposive but is actually without a purpose (‘purposiveness without purpose’ or ‘final without end’). To Kant, the ‘judgements of beauty will be tainted if guided by our practical interests in the object-interest we can plausibly sustain if we take the object to exist’ (Carroll 30).

Peter Lamarque, in the essay “Aesthetics and Literature: A Problematic Relation?” (2007), has pointed out how Frank Sibley’s view on aesthetic concept is differentiated from Kant. To Sibley, aesthetics is not exclusively confined to beauty as claimed by Kant rather it is wider than that. He also recognises descriptive and evaluative elements that can interact in the aesthetic concepts. He maintains that aesthetic properties are emergent that require something more than merely sensory perception for their appreciation, as in the case of literature, language is not the sufficient criteria to appreciate a work aesthetically. There are some other skills involved beyond linguistic competence and in this regard literary appreciation is not a natural but a trained mode of discernment. He also views that there is no logical or inductive relations between an object’s aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties. Thus the idea of condition governed aesthetic concept is challenged. He explains about the applicability of ‘aesthetic particularism’ in appreciation of literary works instead of ‘generalisable’ concept of aesthetics on the ground that same poetic or literary
devices in different works never ensure the sameness of aesthetic effect (Lamarque 30-31).

In *Aesthetic Theory* (2002), Theodor Adorno is concerned not only with such standard aesthetic preoccupations as the function of beauty and sublimity in art, but with the relations between art and society. He feels that modern art's freedom from such restrictions as cult and imperial functions that had plagued previous eras of art has led to art's expanded critical capacity and increased formal autonomy. With this expanded autonomy comes art's increased responsibility for societal commentary. However, Adorno does not feel that overtly politicized content is art's greatest critical strength; rather he champions a more abstracted type of "truth-content" (*Wahrheitsgehalt*). Unlike Kantian or idealist aesthetics, Adorno's aesthetics locates truth-content within the art object, rather than in the perception of the subject. Such content is, however, affected by art's self-consciousness at the hands of its necessary distance from society, which is perceptible in such instances as the dissonances inherent in modern art. Truth-content is ultimately found in the relation between multiple dialectical interactions that emerge from the artwork's position(s) relative to subject and greater societal tradition, as well as internal dialectics within the work itself. Throughout, Adorno praises dramatist Samuel Beckett, to whom the book was dedicated.

Going through Adorno’s aesthetic theory, Zuidervaart introduces the reader to the historical context, the conceptual framework, and the social and political claims of Adorno's aesthetics. There is also paradoxical nature of Adorno's conception of art. He says that the desirable social significance of art is possible only when it is semi-autonomous from society (see Michel 202)
Theodor Adorno felt that aesthetics could not proceed without confronting the role of the culture industry in the commodification of art and aesthetic experience.

Unlike the Western concept of aesthetics, Indian aesthetics is based on the spirituality and propagated by the mainstream Brahminic culture. The Indian culture is essentially ingrained in its spirituality which emphasises much on the soul than the body. It is found that from the era of *Upanisads* down to the era of philosophical debate, the consciousness of Indian mind seeking pleasure has been engaged in searching for transcendental happiness. In order to find out a heavenly spiritual happiness, Indian philosophy, from time immemorial, has worked for transformation from material to immaterial, from mundane to spiritual for realization of the Supreme Being. The pleasure derived from the realization of *rasa* springs from ultimate feelings of the Supreme Being unified with eternal entity. Thus *rasa* theory is more spiritual than ordinary associations of day to day life.

Indian mainstream literary criticism considers *rasa* (sap/juice/taste/supreme joy/mental feeling/aesthetic enjoyment) as the soul of all literature. Sage Bharata has propounded the elaborate theory of *rasa* realization in his treatise entitled *Natyasastra* (c. 200 A.D), and he lists eight types of rasas: the erotic, comic, pathetic, heroic, frightful, furious, and odious and the marvellous. G.N. Devy observes in *Indian Literary Criticism*, the number of rasas was a point of contention from the beginning. Later, critics added a ninth *rasa*, the tranquil. Indian aestheticians frequently link the theory of rasa with spirituality, and finding inspiration in the Advaida Vedanta philosophy of monism, they have tried to “synthesize all *rasas* into a single *rasa*” (Thampi 318).
Ayyappa Panikar, in his essay “Towards an Alternative Aesthetics” (1994), states that one can see the interconnectedness of various strands in the writings of the Blacks or Afro-Americans across the continents and the Dalits in Indian sub-continents. The common features of both these marginal literatures rest on the oral nature of composition and transmission, literature of the downtrodden as experienced in everyday life, nonconformity to the set standards, the sub-culture dominated and controlled by the colonizers or elites, acquiescence and acceptance of the colonizer’s culture or ideology and protest, anger and grief, writings dominated by centrifugal tendencies etc. which promote a culture of protest and resistance against the oppression in search of an alternative aesthetics (see Paniker). The concept of Negritude has emerged out of revolt of the Black man insulted and enslaved by the white supremacists. They accepted the word “negro” which was hurled at them as an epithet and defended theirselves in pride as Black in the face of white (Irele 9) and so is the case of Dalits in India. They articulate their voice for separate aesthetics as their counterpart fails to do in their literature. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes:

We must redefine theory itself from within our own black culture, refusing to grant the racist premise that theory is something that white people do, so we are doomed to imitate our white colleagues, like reverse black minstrel cities done up in whiteface. (qtd in Harlaw 577)

Sharan Kumar Limbale, a prominent Dalit writer, critic has opposed rasa theory and propounded separate Dalit aesthetics in his book Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations (2004). He writes:

How will the taste of the pain, anger, rejection, rebellion, problems, struggles, injustices and ill treatment contained in Dalit literature be known through slow
sipping and relishing? In terms of Dalit literature, the *rasa* theory of aesthetic appreciation seems insufficient. (Limbale 2007, 116)

This is how with the advent of marginal literatures, the entire debate regarding aestheticism in literature has taken a new turn. Today, the social sensibility has been a key element in the concept of aestheticism of marginal literature instead of its literary form, symbols and artistic feature (Kumar 2012).

The Indian elites are habitually engaged in intellection either to create ideological apparatuses or to rehabilitate structures of coercion or to recover themselves from the damage caused by their engagement in modernity. On the contrary, subalterns situate themselves within militancy. The elites are engaged in an attempt to understand whether the creative enterprise of the subaltern are ‘false consciousnesses’ or ‘replication’ of elite structure what Borges termed as the “normal respiration of intelligence” (qtd. in Menon xi), Mimesis, within the anthropological discourse, has been a dominant factor in understanding the South Asian subaltern intellectual creativity. In Indian context, “imitation being the sincerest expressive form of submission” (Menon xi), the culture of the subordinated caste is understood as a mere replication of the thought of dominant caste structure. Casteism exists within the rules of language embodying the dichotomous world view of purity and pollution. Srinivasan’s concept of ‘Sanskritization’ again is a process of diluting the articulation of subaltern voice for social mobilization against casteist anarchy. To quote Menon:

> It is a model of deferred ideal of perfect mimesis, wherein subordinated castes, given time, shall become behaviourally more and more like those above them in the hierarchy. Here, too, the creativity of the subordinated castes lies in replication, not in innovation. *(Ibid xii)*
However he adds that a new trajectory of Dalit writings, mainly academic in its form, has denied the mimesis and the construction of arguments that speak of a different world. The Dalit writings possess an independent world view, autonomous culture that rejects the thoughts based on casteist structure. He says, “Subordinated castes are seen as possessing an independent, autonomous culture that rejects any semblance to the structures of Brahmin thought” (Ibid xii). This practice of innovative culture, in Marxist term, is known as antagonistic ‘class’ culture premised on production relations in sudra polemic as a different domain of sensibility. This involves a subtle account of creativity and historical change, which does not resolve into the question of mimesis or its denial. It creates an anxiety about the presumed stability of identity which in the words of Bhabha, “at once resemblance and menace” (qtd. in Menon xii). The idea of repetition and difference within the space dominant discourse is an extension into the concept of hybridity that makes possible an understanding of repetition as difference (Ibid xii).

Darshana Trivedi in her essay “Literature of their Own: Dalit Literary Theory in Indian Context” examines that Dalit literature rejects canonical literature and it also rejects all the established aesthetic standards of evaluating literature. The purpose of traditional literature is to provide aesthetic pleasure i.e. ‘Brahmananda-sahodaradanand’. Though traditional aesthetics talks about three basic principles of literature, Satayam (Truth), Shivam (goodness), Sundaram (beauty), it is never realistic. On the contrary, Dalit literature is realistic in true sense. Man is at the centre of Dalit literature, man is superior to God and goddesses or even to nation. Hence when we evaluate a Dalit text we can neither apply Bharata’s concept of ‘Nayaka Dhirdat’, Dhirlalit, Dhir Prasant or Dhiruddat, nor can we apply Jagannath’s definition of poetry Vakyam rasatamkam Kavayam”. Dalit literature
also rejects the Western theories like Freud’s Psychoanalysis, Barthe’s structuralism or Derrida’s deconstruction. It rejects Indian theories like *Rasa* and *Dhawani* as need.

Dr. C.B. Bharti in his Hindi article “The Aesthetics of Dalit literature” writes:

The aim of Dalit literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes. There is an urgent need to create a separate aesthetics for Dalit literature, an aesthetics based on the real experiences of life. (qtd. in Prasad 6)

Going through the realistic and revelatory kind of narration of Dalit literature Darshana Trivedi finds it problematic in perceiving beauty of Dalit character in accordance with the mainstream norms. She writes:

We cannot evaluate the beauty of Dalit women by keeping Shakuntal’s concept in mind (Kimiv hi madhuranam hi mandanakrutum). The beauty of Dalit women lies in the web of perspiration on her face while she works in the field. (Trivedi 7)

D. Padmarani in the essay “Distinctive Voices of Distress” asserts that Dalit literature is not devoid of aesthetics. She refers to Enduluri Sudhakar who describes the beauty of a Dalit woman who rushes towards the land with all vigour and vitality with sickle in her hand. Sudhakar criticizes the ancient literary works for not making Dalit woman the heroine. (D. Padmarani,: 2007, p. 83)

In this context the representative of Indian beauty, especially in painting, may be evaluated. Ravi Raja Verma is a famous Indian painter belonging to early modern era. His paintings represent typical Indian aesthetics where there is no place
of subaltern beauty of dark Dalit women with the exception of Tagore’s painting of
dark women as the representative beauty.

Sharan Kumar Limbale is one of the prominent founders of Dalit aesthetics. While
propagating Dalit aesthetics he has considered the mainstream critiques of
aesthetics. He says that Dalit literature is a movement, and a vehicle of pain, sorrow,
questions and problems. Since Dalit literature is a life-affirming literature all strands
of it are tied to life. Dalit writers claim that they write for humanity.

According to Limbale the concept of beauty which has been propagated by
the mainstream critic of Indian aesthetics tends to revolve around the feelings of
pleasure and empathy aroused by viewing the object instead of being concerned with
the form of an object. The pleasure and empathy produced by beauty concerns the
aesthete who is as important as an artist and the artistic creation. The artists have to
create the beauty in their works agreeable to the aesthete. Everyone has the sense of
beauty but only the artistes have the aptitude and taste for beauty. So the ability to
imagine beauty is the gift of high culture. In this regard, he quotes N.G. Chapekar’s
opinion, “To experience beauty, a cultured mind, health, and enthusiasm are
necessary” (qtd. in Limbale 112).

However, Limbale criticizes the pleasure centric aesthetic judgement of
literature. He says, “If pleasure is the basis of the aesthetics of Marathi savarna
literature, pain is the basis of the aesthetics of Dalit literature” (2007, 114). It is a
problematic for a reader to be pleased by reading the pain and protest as expressed
in Dalit literature. He writes:

How can the aestheticism in discussions of beauty be reconciled with the Dalit
consciousness in Dalit literature? This revolutionary consciousness is based on ideas
of equality, liberty, justice, and solidarity, rather than pleasure. This is why it is important for Dalit critics to change the imaginary of beauty. In every age the imaginary of beauty is linked to the prevailing ideas. At one time, for example, kings and emperors used to be the subjects of literature. But today, the life lived in huts and cottages situated outside the boundary of the village has become the subject of literature. It has become necessary to transform the imaginary of beauty because it is not possible to investigate the creation of Dalit literature and its commitment to revolt and rejection within the framework of traditional aesthetics.

(Ibid 115)

Limbale has criticized the proposal of Yadunath Thatte to accept ‘revolt’ as the tenth rasa and ‘cry’ as the eleventh rasa recognized by Acharya Jawdekar. He has denied the demand of Yadunath Thatte in increasing the number of rasas. To him, Dalit literature is not pleasure giving literature and propounded separate aesthetic for Dalit literature which is based on materialist idea of aesthetic, Ambedkarite thought and seeking freedom as aesthetic value. He writes:

The traditional theory of beauty seems abstruse and spiritualistic. According to this theory the beauty of an artistic creation lies in its expression of world consciousness or other worldliness. The traditional theory is universalistic and spiritualistic. The aesthetic, which proposes that the beauty of a work of art is its artistic rendering of reality, is materialist. Dalit literature rejects spiritualism and abstraction, its aesthetics is materialist rather than spiritualist. (Ibid 116)

The Ambedkarite thought and the articulation of life-affirming values in the works of Dalit writers speak for the liberation of the Dalits from their wretchedness. The value of a literary work depends on how much and in what way an artist’s ideas imbedded in the work can influence/affect the reader. Limbale says, “That work of
Dalit literature will be recognized as beautiful, and, therefore ‘good’, which causes the greatest awakening of Dalit consciousness in the reader” (*Ibid* 117).

The Dalit writers need to become one with their inspiration. They also require a heightened consciousness of literature in order to give literary expression to their inspiration and (their) experience of it. Limbale writes, “The deeper the relationship of readers with a Dalit writer’s inspiration, the greater will be their liking for the work” (*Ibid* 117). In this process of literary work, written out of heightened consciousness with experience producing inspiration for the readers, all three components such as the artist, the artistic creation, and the reader are inseparable from each other. The artist’s personality is reflected in the work, and the reader’s personality is unified with this reflection. The artist and the reader become one in the artistic creation. The meeting of the two depends on possessing the common values. So there is apparent difference on the intensity of sharing the experiences of Dalit writers by the Dalit and the non-Dalit readers. On the question of permanence of beauty in Dalit literature, he says:

It should be kept in mind that while the concept of beauty in Dalit literature cannot be a universal concept, the Ambedkarite inspiration expressed in it can be of universal value. (*Ibid* 117)

The readers of any text have some pre-determined assumptions that precede the reading. The reader examines whether these assumptions are challenged or confirmed by the text. So the same work is liked by one reader while for another may be disliking. So, Dalit literature cannot be appraised fully without the knowledge of the Dalit writer’s experience, their anger, rejection, rebellion, traditional values and social context. The literature that glorifies pleasure gives
central place to the pleasure-seeking aesthete. Dalit literature, on the other hand, promotes equality, freedom and justice, and emphasizes on human being and society. Limbale has briefly summed up Dalit aesthetics as:

The aesthetics of Dalit literature rests on: first, the artists’ social commitment; second, the life-affirming values present in the artistic creation; and third, the ability to raise the reader’s consciousness of fundamental values like equality, freedom, justice and fraternity. (Ibid 120)

On the basis of Indian aesthetics R.G. Jadhav proposes the autonomy of text of Dalit literature. However, it may be noted that Theodor Adorno’s aesthetics reveals the paradoxical nature of art which has desirable significance only when it is semi-autonomous from society. Adorno’s philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic ideas, is reflected in the society as he states that there is “the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth” (qtd. in Michel 202). Dalit aesthetics has drawn similar line like that of Adorno’s notion of aesthetic which is a kind of negative dialectic of Kantian aesthetics.

According to Limbale, the Dalit concept of beauty is temporal in comparison to the universal concept of beauty propagated by traditional Indian aesthetics. As noted by C.B. Bharti, Dalit women’s beauty cannot be compared with the traditional kind of beauty of Shakuntala as represented by Kalidasa and later by Ravi Raja Verma in painting. Limable’s autobiography The Outcaste narrates an episodic story of author’s love for a Mahar Dalit girl in his neighborhood. He describes the surroundings of his beloved’s house having the typical Dalit habitation with poor condition of living. He writes:
Her house was rather bare and it disturbed me whenever I looked at it. The scorching sun, dogs with their tongues lolling in the heat, utterly charmless children, an old hag smoking, holes in the crumbling walls of the house, drunkards stumbling along. What else was there in our locality to interest one? But when Shewanta and I became interested in each other, even such depressing surroundings seemed attractive. (Outcaste 25)

He has narrated the beauty of a Dalit girl, Shewanta with whom he had a fling during his school days. He writes:

Shewanta never smiled wholeheartedly. She had never oiled her hair. At home Shewants was like an ox harnessed to the oil press that goes round and round in a dark room from morning till evening. It was sheer drudgery. Shewanta’s eyes were as humble as a cow’s. Her mother wore an old sari, all patched up. Her father wore a ragged shirt. Shewanta used to pick out and crush lice from her sister’s heads. I would watch Shewanta, as if I was witnessing an accident. (Ibid 26)

The beauty of Shewanta here can never be compared with Shakuntala the ideal figure of Indian traditional aesthetics which is subjective and spiritual in nature. Dalit aesthetics of Limbale shows affinities with Adorno who has defined aesthetics as objective in nature that concerns the voice of suffering and that is a condition of all truth.

In Joothan Valmiki narrates the story of rejection of Joothan, the leftover food by his mother. Sukhadev Sing Tyagis daughter was getting married. Valmikis mother used to clean their place for the last few days before the wedding. His father was also doing works for that marriage ceremony by going to villages to collect Charpais (cots) for the guests. When the Barat, the accompanying guests of the bridegroom were eating, Valmikis mother was sitting outside the door with a basket.
Valmiki, with his younger sister Maya, was sitting close to his mother in the hope that they would get a share of the sweets and delicious dishes that he could smell coming from inside. As the feast was over his mother requested to Sukhadev Sing Tyagi for some food for her children. In reply Sukhadev Sing Tyagi showed her the basketfull of dirty pattals and said, “You are taking a basket full of Joothan. And on top of that you want food for your children. Don’t forget your place, Chuhri. Pick up your basket and get going” (Ibid 11). His mother resisted the humiliation by Sukhadev Sing Tyagi expressing her anger and emptied the basket right there. She said to Sukhadev: “Pick it up and put it inside your house feed it to the Baratis tomorrow morning” (Ibid 11). She gathered her children and left the place quickly. Sukhadev had tried to hit her but the author’s mother confronted him like a lioness without fear. This very act of rejection of Joothan and resistant to the humiliation og Sukhadev inspired the author and made him conscious of their wretchedness.

Valmiki’s narration on the teaching of the lesson of Dronacharya in his school made him conscious of the discrimination of narrative representation of the Dalits. He understood how the mythological narratives were not bothered to narrate the poverty of the outcastes. The episode of Dronacharya’s famine describes that he had to provide flour dissolved in water to his famished son Ashwatthama, in lieu of milk. The whole class gave heed to the story of Dronacharya’s dire poverty with great emotion. This was intensely highlighted by the author of the Mahabharata. In all audacity, young Om Prakash stood up and asks the teacher a question:

So Ashwatthama was given flour mixed in water instead of milk, but what about us who had to drink mar? How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn’t an epic poet ever write a word on our lives? (Ibid 23)
The whole class stared him and the teacher screamed at, “Darkest Kaliyug has descended upon us so that an untouchable is daring to talk back” (Ibid 23). Later on Valmiki had to undergo physical punishment by the teacher. Valmiki mentions the irate outbursts of his teacher while beating him up, “Chuhre ke, you dare compare yourself with Dronacharya … Here take this I will write an epic on your body” (Ibid 23).

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

Valmiki’s struggle for education is a reflection of Ambedkar’s ideology that he stated in his historical speech in Yeola, “Educate, agitate and unite.” Surajbhan Taga’s son Brajesh once stood Valmiki’s way to school and threatened and humiliated him primarily because Valmiki did well in school as a student. He said, “Chuhre ke, you really have sprouted horns. You have become arrogant. Even your stride has changed” (Ibid 28). He further said that Valmiki would remain a Chuhra however much he studied. He pushed Valmiki with a stick and threw his books scattered around on the way. His back has fallen into muddy ditch. It seemed to him that it was impossible for him to go to school any more. But his father’s face came before him saying, “You have to improve the caste by studying” (Ibid 29). The similar kind of description is found in the narration of Bama’s Karukku, where Anna, Bama’s brother, inspired her to study well so that she became respectable person in society. The struggle for education by the protagonists of the autobiographies is a part of their self respect movement which also forms one of their aesthetic strategies.
Valmiki was greatly influenced by Ambedkar. He read several books by Gandhi in the library of Indresh Nagar which was run by the Jatavs. It was Hemlal one of his friends who gave him the book *Dr Ambedkar: A Biography* written by Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu. He read several books on Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Rajendra Parsad, Radhakrishnan, Vivekananda, and Tagore and so on. But he was completely ignorant of Dr Ambedkar, even upto his twelve class in Tyagi Inter College, Barla. He was not aware of Ambedkar till then. His exposure to Ambedkar brought a positive change to his life and the way he used to think. He expressed his gratitude to Hemlal for showing him a new path. He writes:

My reading these books had awakened my consciousness. These books had given voice to my muteness. It was during this time in my life when an anti-establishment consciousness became in me. (*Ibid* 72)

After reading his Ambedkar a new word Dalit entered his vocabulary which was not a substitute for Harijan but an expression of protest of the untouchable masses of India:

I was beginning to realize that the education imparted in schools and colleges did not make us secular but turned us into narrow-minded fundamentalist Hindus. The deeper eye was getting into this literature, the more articulate my rage became. I began to debate with my college friends and put my doubts before my teacher. It was this literature that had given me courage. (*Ibid* 72-73)

The author here as an autobiographer plays a role of an artist and as a reader of Ambedkarite philosophy became an Aesthete. Valmiki knows that while he was in Jabalpur his manner of speaking and the way he mixed up with his friends changed in a positive way. He became involved in literary circle of Jabalpur and developed his own views on literature. He was attracted to social realism than to
aestheticist and formalist type of writings. His empathy towards Dalits has been in public when he wrote an article in the *Navbharat Times*, Bombay, on the incidents of ‘Ganwai Brothers’ that took place in Pune. This is how being inspired by the philosophy of Ambedkar, Valmiki started his writings with intense Dalit consciousness. The Dalit aesthetics has been essentially informed by such socio-political exigencies.

Limbale in *The Outcaste* comes away several stories of insult and humiliation of the Dalits by the upper castes. About Santamai’s moving stories of sufferings Limbale writes:

I thought Santahmai’s tears were like an epic. Her agony contained the potential spark of a great war. What a miserable past we had lived! My agony was not limited to myself alone. Injustice done to me was not just today’s phenomenon but had a long history. The roots of this injustice went deep into histories for many thousands of years. My agony was also the agony of Lord Buddha. I see the same agony even today but why is not the Buddha in me aroused. (*Outcaste* 73)

It was Ithal Kamble who not only divorced and discarded Masamai but also snatched away her suckling baby. After divorcing her, he married another woman and became father of many children. Unfortunately, he was suffering from a disease which both doctors and prayers could not cure. Some people said that he was suffering because of Masamai’s curse as he had humiliated her. So, he came back to Masamai to lessen his sin that he had done to her. Masamai also forgoes all her past sufferings and was strongly determined to save her husband. She took every care for him whole heartedly and with great devotion. Santhamai also prayed before God for her husband. So despite Ithal Kamble’s injustice to Masamai, she did her duty as a
typical Dalit wife which is nothing but a life affirming value of humanity which Dalit aesthetics speaks of.

It is found that Dalit children, men and women often have a nick name either given by their relatives out of affection or by the neighbors to make him or her as part of joke. Many high caste people would call the Dalit people by a nick name as a faceless identity without having names. Just as we find in *Joothan*, the Bhangi’s are addressed as Chuhra or Chuhri with pejorative tone. But in many cases the Dalit people themselves adopt nick names. So these names are characterized by either inherent physical features or by their very nature of birth and day to day activities. And in many a cases though some feel humiliated, most of the time they are happy with such of names. The names of the Dalit people often bear the reality of society and there lies the beauty of Dalit people. In Bama’s *Karukku*, such names are projected for portraying the realistic picture of the Dalit society. She writes:

People’s baptismal names, given at church, were one thing; the names we used in the street were quite another. One child’s name was Munkovam, short tempered. A women was called Midday-masala … A certain child who was very dark skinned and plumb was named Murugan-spring pig. It seems that pigs wondered about, well fed and plumb, by the spring of Murugan; that is why. (*Karukku* 8)

There are so many nick names; Bama has referred in her *Karukku*. She has projected these characters through which the culture of the people is portrayed in real terms. She has described the talent of a man named Uudan, blower who was renowned in her village whose real name was unknown to Bama and others in her village. He knew how to play the flute really well. Whenever there had been a programmer of singing and dancing with a mike set in the hall, Uudan would play his flute. There were other people of her community having extraordinary quality in arts. Pig-
Pavulu’s son was a great pranksear who once plucked the drums and other instruments of the drummers along with five others and played even better than the professional drummers as they were completely drunk and were stumbling during the Easter programme. Several others have been described with their excellent aptitude for song, dance and rhythm, even though they did not have proper learning.

Bama became self sufficient as she was appointed as a teacher and she realized that education was the only way for her comments to get rid of unspeakable material and social destitution. She writes:

I realized that if only the children on my street acquired a little education and found jobs, then they too could live reasonably well. But then, how are they to educate themselves? The struggle to fill their bellies is their main struggle, after all. (*Ibid* 77)

This thought led Bama to take a great decision to serve the people of her community and wanted to become a nun and enter the order of a convent. Bama writes:

There was a desire in my heart to help other children to better themselves, as I, born into the same community, had been able to do, because of my education. I really wanted to teach such children. But I understood, after I entered the order that the convent I entered didn’t even care to glance at poor children, and only wished to serve the children of the wealthy. In that convent, they really do treat the people who suffer from poverty in one way, and those who have money in their pockets in a totally different way. (*Ibid* 77)

Bama’s narration of her desire to enter the convent is a social commitment. The act of her leaving the order shows her bold initiative to resist the hypocrisy of the authorities of the convent along with her life affirming values to work for the
poor. Bama’s narrative becomes an intense social commentary aiming at bringing emancipative values for change.

Gaikwad’s *The Branded: Uchalya*, gives a searing picture of casteism, superstitions, poverty, police torture, oppression by the high caste people and mill owners. The narrator experiences mental as well as physical torture in his childhood life for his family’s thieving profession. But very soon he becomes orphan child as she dies due lack of proper treatment. The narrator gives a realistic picture of his mother through his beautiful narration making her a universal Dalit mother. As the autobiography begins, the author describes the police tyranny on their family. When the police went to their house, his mother hid herself in the jungle to save herself from the police though his mother was never into stealing. She ran a milk business and had deep affection for her children. The author recalls:

Mother used to collect milk from our house and village and go to Latur to sell it. She would always bring some edibles for us. Sometimes, the milk curdled; then, mother brought it home and wept bitterly. But I used to be pleased, for Dada used to mix jiggery in it and give me. I liked that sweetened milk. (*The Branded* 24)

The mother had to work hard to feed their children. She expressed her sorrow as for that business she had to leave them home. There had often been leakage in their thatched roofed house during rainy season. She earned some money from milk business and made the house with an iron-sheet-roof. The author narrates how her mother took care of him when he was suffering from boil all over his head. She felt that she was the cause for the suffering of her son as she gave up fasting on Tuesdays. Gaikwad writes about her love for him:
She was awfully frightened and said, ‘This disease seems to be the curse of the Goddess. Harlot that I am, I gave up fasting on Tuesdays and so my poor son is afflicted with this dirty disease.’ She brought ash of the cowdung-cake from the stove and prayed, ‘Oh! Goddess-Mother! Please cure my child of this disease. As long as I don’t sacrifice a goat to you, I shall fast both on Fridays and on Tuesdays.’ (Ibid 25)

Mother Dhandabai’s ardent love for the author has been described when he was lost in Siddheshwar fair at Latur. He happened to be there in Latur fair alone without informing anyone of his family. On his return home he could not find anyone to guide him. He began to cry as he roamed around calling for his mother. Mother Dhandabai and Dada at the suggestion of More, the hotel owner, got an announcer to move through all the town and announced loudly that a boy from Dhanegaon had strayed and was not being found. The author heard the announcement and ran up to the announcer. He was taken to Mother and the eldest brother. He writes his mother’s reaction:

Mother and Dada began to weep hugging me to their breasts. After they had had their cry, they beat me admonishing, Will you again come to Latur like this? You scamp, do you want to die under a bus? They kept on chiding me thus. I began to cry loudly. So Mother bought me a chhatak of jeelebi. (Ibid 29)

Mother, Dhandabai was caught fever and she stopped her milk-selling business. The house ran through extreme poverty leaving no money to spend for her treatment. They had to sell a brass pitcher at Latur to take her to Jawali for treatment. Eventually, one day a man came from Jawali and informed them about the death of Mother, Dhondabai, a death which was caused by poverty and lack of
medical treatment as well as their superstitious beliefs. The narration of Dhondabai’s motherly affection is universally appealing.

Aesthetics, from Adorno’s point of view, locates truth-content within the art object, rather than in the perception of the subject. From the point of view of Dalit aesthetics the plight of the mother who died of hard work and out of hapless poverty informs Dalit consciousness of their social and economic reality.

III

Roland Barthes commented, ‘the history of narrative begins with the history of (hu)mankind; there does not exist, and has never existed, a people without narratives’ (1966: 14).

David Herman, while giving the working definition of narrative in his book *Basic Elements of Narrative*, writes:

Narrative ... is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change - a strategy that contrasts with, but is in no way inferior to, ”scientific” modes of explanation that characterize phenomena as instances of general covering laws. (Herman 2)

Narrative is characterised by a mode of representation that is situated in a specific discourse context which focuses on a structured time-course of particularised events. In addition, the events, represented, are such that they introduce some sort of disruption into a story world whether that world is actual or fictional, realistic or fantastic, remembered or dreamed, etc (*Ibid* 9). In the context of Dalit literary narratives, the mode of representation of world making or world disruption in a situated Indian literary discourse creates a new discourse of Dalit

Narration is admittedly a kind of play-acting. Granting the artificiality of the process, we still maintain that it is not all a game, not a game every time, and not a game with every person. Some sense of identity emerges from the text from the text of the narrative through the interest in, and desire for, self-revelation or a chance to articulate to a listener their own constructions of the significant. (Franco *et al.* 4)

Dalit narrative is a subversive kind of narrative against established narrative based on caste hierarchy. Bakhtin’s concept of carnivalesque suggests the primacy of an inherently subversive force that effectively disrupts the official categories which confer and contain meaning. It is pertinent to the Dalit narrative discourse as well. In contemporary hegemonic world, we may reread such inversion as articulation of challenge to the established social order. There are complex inter-relationships of festivity, transgression and counter-hegemonic cultural politics. We can find the transgressive unofficial discourse in the perpetual silence of the marginalised other. Dalits have remained voiceless in the margins for ages that could never have the authority to author themselves. Transgressive discourse has helped them to question the efficacy of institutionalised representations without ambivalence (Bhattarjee 112-113). Dalit discourse subverts the established category of meaning and identities and as we find in carnivals. Dalit literature deconstructs the mainstream Indian literary representations through subversion like subversive force of carnivaleque nature.

Badri Narayan opines that the Dalit narratives are the narratives of identity and self-respect. He writes:
The new narratives of the Dalit politics, which appear as cultural narratives of identity and self-respect are filled with memories of dissent against dominance and oppression. (Narayan 2006, 40)

The Dalit narratives are written in the respective Dalit idiom. The construction of the Dalit narratives is based on a sense of self-respect.

As noted by William L. Howarth, in his essay “Some Principles of autobiography” the decision of writing one’s autobiography is at least a strategic beginning. He mentions about three key elements of autobiography - character, technique and theme that subsequently guide a writer’s progress. It is the autobiographer’s sense of self, place, history and motives which builds the image or self-portrait of the autobiographer. Unlike the writers of epic poem, sonnet, short story, the autobiographers enjoy freedom in employing techniques to reach to his art objective. Barret John Mandel, in his essay “The Autobiographer’s Art”, writes:

The autobiographer has no limitations whatsoever as to the techniques he may employ in bringing his self-view to the printed page; here he has more freedom than writers in most other genres. The writer of an epic poem is more or less restricted to … But in autobiography the form (say, the development of an artistic sensibility) may find its expression in a long (or short) prose narrative, either purely expository or mixed with dialogue and other devices of characterization; it may be embodied in one kind of poetry or another, from the long blank verse poem to the lyric; presumably it can take shape dramatically as well. (Mandel 222)

Dalit writers are motivated for writing their autobiography not for portraying personal and family history of pride to the future generations, but for representing a
Dalit life as one of the members of Dalit community. The Dalit autobiographer is motivated to historicise the experience of Dalitness, and philosophise their struggle for existence, socio-political values. Dalit autobiographies are, thus, both individual and community narratives. The discovery of self-knowledge, from the experiences they had had, helps them to define themselves in their own terms, and makes free them from imposed social definitions.

Valmiki’s *Joothan* is constituted of events in thirty seven sections which have been arranged in a sequence from his childhood village life to his attaining a position of an established Hindi poet, critic and a Dalit activist. Vasant Moon’s *Growing Up Untouchable in India* is composed of twenty eight chapters consisting of different events. Each of them is like an independent story with a title. Moon narrates the stories of his individual experience of Dalitness and his participation in Dalit movement from school life to his establishment as a deputy county commissioner of Darvha of the Yeotmal district. The widely acclaimed autobiography, *Karukku* is constituted of nine sections along with a postscript. In *Karukku* Bama has narrated various events of experiences as a member of Paraya community from her childhood village life to her renunciation from convent life of nun. This is how Limbale’s *Outcaste* is composed of forty four segments of stories related to his experience of various events from his early school life to his life of a telephone operator up to twenty five years of age. Unlike aforesaid four autobiographies *The Branded- Uchalya* by Laxman Gaikwad is written without any section on various events of experiences that he gathered from his childhood life of pilferer community till his struggle as a leader of workers in cotton mail and as a Dalit politician-activist.
It is observed that, except a few, there are similarities in the events narrated in the selected autobiographies. There are various events which underline the themes of Dalit autobiographies, such as, the experience of Dalit habitation since childhood at the margin of the villages, devoid of all norms of health and hygiene, segregated from the villages of high caste people, corporal punishment and humiliation received in schools from the teachers and students respectively, the experience of untouchability both in school and society, the incessant struggle to continue study, the experience of severe poverty, the struggle of the parents and guardians to manage hardly two times meals, humiliation by the high caste people, the issue of gender inequality and patriarchy; engagement of all the people of Dalit household for working in the field and houses of the high caste people, the caste based harassment and violence meted out to the Dalits by high caste, the harassment by the police, everlasting indebtedness of the Dalits caused by the money-lenders, etc.

The theme of quest for identity is an unrelenting aspect of the Dalit autobiographies. The question of identity represents the struggles of the Dalits for social equality and justice. Like other Dalit personal narratives, the select five autobiographies represent the caste history of the Dalits. In the course of writing caste history, the narrators question the mainstream culture, religion, values and the basis of oppression. In such enterprise, the Dalit autobiographical narratives construct an alternative history by substantially depicting their culture, language and myth. Despite a little difference with regard to the events, the themes of caste based violence and injustice done to the Dalits and search for identity through Dalit resistance against injustice remain the central focus in these autobiographies. Because of this, Dalit literature is charged as ‘univocal’, ‘monotonous’ and ‘static’. However, Limbale, a major Dalit critic and aesthetician agrees to this charge and
explains the rationality for univocality of Dalit writings. He says that univocality is the result of the expression of ideological view which is common to all Dalit writers. He argues:

Untouchables’ experiences of untouchability are identical. The name of the village may well be different, but the nature of tyranny against Dalits is the same. Social boycott, separate bastis, wells and cremation grounds; inability to find rental accommodation; the necessity to conceal the caste; denial of admission to public places; injustices done to Dalit women; ... Because of the commonalities in Dalit writers thoughts, experiences and emotions, Dalit literature appears to be unovocal. (Limbale 2004, 35)

When there is commonality on the issue of identity in their narratives, strong individual self cannot be ignored in relation to the autobiographers/narrator’s rejection of superstitious cultural tradition of his community. Simultaneously, individual narrators excel in their intellectual capability. In Joothan Valmiki registers his complaint against certain traditions like – doing ‘salaam’ in marriage ceremony; treatment of ailment by bhagats, the charmers; sacrificing and killing piglets in the name of worship etc. He says, “My opinion about all these things being a fraud had been further strengthened. Who knows how many people these bhagats had killed” (Valmiki 43). Valmiki’s individual achievement as a first matriculate from his community; his interest in dramatic performance; the poetic zeal and dedication for Dalit cause as an established Dalit writer are the qualities which make his individual self transformative. The narration of individual self is pertinent in all the select autobiographies.

Though autobiographical narratives do not, necessarily, require sequence of events in absolute term, the minimum maintenance of it helps the readers to grasp
the text easily by which the autobiographer presents the problems or conflicts, will and woe for effective reception by the readers.

Unlike the traditional autobiographies, written by the mainstream writers, politicians, intellectuals, most of the Dalit autobiographies narrate their experiences of individual and communal selves from a Dalit point of view. It is found that each of the autobiographies carries a number of episodic stories which make the narratives complex and in respect to the representation of Dalit experiences.

Valmiki’s *Joothan* begins with first person possessive ‘our’ who is the main character narrating the whole story of various events that he experienced in his life focusing on the issues and themes that he wants to reveal before the reading public. It is found that through the use of first ‘I’ the Dalit autobiographers express not only his/her individual experiences that transforms to a conscious self, but raise question to various issues like internalising protest against the injustice, ethics, morality, value system, socio-political perspectives seeking reformation in them. Many a time by the first person narration, the autobiographer justifies his or her position in philosophising certain social aspects. Valmiki’s question on neglecting the representation of the Dalits’ plight in the epics; his question on misbehaving with the students by the teachers; his negation of significance of Sumitranandan Pant’s aesthetic relevance of describing the village life as beautiful and wonderful within the caste hierarchy and many among other such questions by which the narrator shares his opinions and views with the readers. Many a time Limbale in *The Outcaste*, using the first person narration, asks question to himself in search of his position in different socio-political situations. As a student of third form it was difficult for him to write an essay about the picnic he attended with his schoolmates. But on teacher’s insistence and calling him a son of a bitch, he asked himself, “How
should I start writing the essay my teacher had asked for?” (*The Outcaste* 4). In *The Outcaste*, lots of questions are made by the narrator both in first person and third person, but technically the answers lay in the conscious self of the narrator. The most important questions raised by the narrator in *Outcaste* have pointed out the whole discourse of Dalit identity and caste based violence meted out to the Dalits. To quote Limbale:

> Why did my mother say yes to the rape which brought me into the world? Why did she put up with the fruit of this illegitimate intercourse for nine months and nine days and allow in the foetus? Why did she allow this bitter embryo to grow? How many eyes must have humiliated her because they considered her as a whore? Did anyone distribute sweets to celebrate my birth? Did anyone admire me affectionately? Did anyone celebrate my naming ceremony? Which family would claim me as its descendant? Whose son am I really? (Limbale 2011, 37)

These questions intensify the thoughts, feelings, views about the significance of the events.

The third person point of view is regarded as effective point of view for formal writing as it is impersonal and does not force an opinion on the reader. It often relies on fact and not opinion which is apparently objective and omniscient. Despite the use of the first person narration of the events in Dalit autobiographies, many of them are described in third person signifying narrator’s knowledge and authorial subjectivity. The author’s knowledge and subjectivity are manifested in the third person narration in *Joothan*, such as Taga’s misery and exploitation of the Dalits during harvesting time, the portrayal of village money lender, violence in institutions against the Dalit youths by the teachers, the incidents of forced and unpaid labour, and identity crisis among the educated Dalits residing in urban areas.
etc. In Limbale’s *The Outcaste* the narrator furnishes the third person narration about the untouchability that was prevalent in educational institution, in day to day activities, in culture and economic activities of Maharwada. Bama’s *Karukku* also opens up with third narration and shows her authorial subjectivity in describing location of her village, her people, their hard working nature, poverty, religion, myth of Nallathangaal, casteism, socio-economic exploitation, untouchability in Catholic order etc.

The Dalit aesthetician Sharan Kumar Limbale proclaims that Dalit literature is a distinct kind of literature for its social realism. To quote him:

The reality of Dalit literature is distinct, and so is the language of the reality. It is the uncouth – impolite language of Dalits. It is the spoken language of Dalits. This language does not recognize cultivated gestures and grammar. It is said that language changes after every twenty miles, but the arithmetic turns out to be wrong with respect to Dalits. In the same village, differences are evident between the language of the village and the language of the untouchable quarters. (Limbale 2004, 33)

The Dalit autobiographies have been a popular form of writings for the readers not only because of their revelation of caste oppression but also because of its simplified, picturesque, and vivid description of each event of Dalit life right from the beginning to the end of the autobiography. The Dalit autobiographers describe their story in the language used in their daily life. Limbale narrates a tragic picture of his childhood along with the other children of his locality. He writes:

There were about a hundred and twenty-five huts in our Maharwada. Ten to fifteen boys were from my class and there were seven to eight girls who had not yet reached puberty. I was crazy about a girl named Shewanta. Her house was rather
bare and it disturbed me whenever I looked at it. The schorching sun, dogs with
their tongues lolling in the heat, utterly charmless children, an old hag smoking,
holes in the crumbling walls of the house, drunkards stumbling along … Her three
younger sisters cried almost continually. They were all hungry, because her parents,
when going out to work, left only two bhakaris in the house. (The Outcaste 25)

In the “Translator’s note to the Second Edition” Lakshmi Holmstorm gives a
brief note on her use of language in Karukku. She says that Bama has used
colloquial language routinely as her medium for narration and even in her argument.
Holmstorm writes:

She uses Dalit style of language which overturns the decorum and aesthetics of
received upper-class, upper-caste Tamil. She breaks the rules of written grammar
and spelling throughout, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new
and different pattern of reading. (in The Outcaste xix)

The Dalit autobiographies are written in Dalit idioms. While introducing and
addressing the characters in their personal narratives, the Dalit writers use such
vocabulary different from the one used by the mainstream writers. They use the
pronouns “I”, “we” and “our” for representing the Dalits and “you”, “yours”, “they”,
and “their’ for addressing the non-Dalits especially the so called upper caste Hindu
elites. The third person narration provides a sense of authentic distentiation and at
the same time establishes a credible intimacy with the readers.

The select set of autobiographies have ample use of sensory details such as
sights, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings, and textures which create vivid images in the
mind of the readers. The Dalit autobiographers, who are mostly in their early stage
of life, have written these autobiographies with impulsive act of identity assertion
and with vivid sensory details. There are also the uses of spatial order to create a clear visual image of a person, place, object, or scene.

Valmiki’s description of the village, in the beginning of Joothan gives a sensory description drawn by the sense of sight. In another description of the events, ‘joothan’, the scraps, remains the focus of identity question where the narrator himself is engaged in drying up the ‘joothan’ and guarding them from the attack of crows, hens and dogs that evokes a sight of an innocent poor Dalit boy and the condition of his family. There are certain descriptions of the narrative where a reader can have a sense of smell. After the daylong works in the house of Sukhdev Singh Tyagi on the occasion of his daughter’s marriage, Valmiki’s mother waited for ‘Joothan’, the scraps. The smell of cooking food was hanging around the air and Valmiki’s narration gives an olfactic description of it. He says:

The barat was eating. My mother was sitting outside the door with her basket. I and my sister Maya sat close to my mother in the hope that we too would get a share of the sweets and the gourmet dishes that we could smell cooking inside. (Joothan 10)

The sense of hearing is evident in the description of the rainy night that destroyed many houses of narrator’s village gives a picture viewed through sense of sight; the sound of heavy rainfall can be heard and the plight of Valmiki’s family and the villagers can be felt physically and mentally as well.

The Dalit autobiographers use the technique of ‘backstory’ to add depth or layers to their personal story intensifying the Dalit experience both of individual and community life. The deployment of backstories makes autobiographical representation a complex reality of author’s individual and social self. These stories are described in third person narration revealing the social relation of the Dalit
communities, their culture, and author’s position in such environment in relation to a particular time and place, which remains fundamental in recovering the socio-political and cultural history of the Dalits. Among the five select Dalit autobiographies Limbale’s *Outcaste* has engaged more ‘backstories’ in delineating the author’s life in terms of authenticity of fact and reality. To exhibit these series of autobiographical events Limbale significantly adjoined several backstories like unsuccessful married life of Santamai, the grandmother; the story of Masamai’s marriage to Ithal Kamble and the subsequent divorce by Kamble etc. which act as backdrops to Limbale’s family history. There are many such back stories in the narrative. The issue of patriarchy and gender inequality is reflected in the backstories of Devki, a spinster; Dhanavva a young girl made pregnant by her father; and the story of Rangoo, a prostitute working in Bombay. The frustration of the young Dalit boys and girls following terrible untouchability and social segregation are reflected in the back stories related to narrator’s childhood friend Harya, Parshya, Shewanta, Parbatajya and Shevanta, a girl married to a person of Sholapur from his village.

Valmiki in his *Joothan* narrates the backstories, like, Hiram Singh’s marriage at Mona; the physical violence of the young Dalits for their refusal of unpaid labour; the hollow hospitality in the house of Brajapal Singh, a teacher; the description of the condition of Dalit villages at Chandrapur district; stories of concealing caste name etc. that provide the social reality of Bhangi society in Hindi speaking Dalit regions. In her autobiography *Karukku* Bama gives a subtle description of the socio-cultural status of Paraya community through various backstories. The narration of the myth of Nallathangal; her grandmother’s working as a maid servant in the Naickers’ families; Anna’s introduction as a member of Paraya community; the
story of violence between two community over the cemetery; and the story of bullock cart, priest and construction of a church are the backstories with the help of which the autobiographical narrator tries to construct the Dalit cultural history.

Assertion of Dalit identity is a recurrent theme in all the Dalit personal narratives. However, the narrators construct that identity through emphatic assertion of resistance and rationality against the established hegemonic norms and manipulative rituals that legitimize all sorts of violence and injustice on them by the society. Valmiki questions on ‘joothan’, the scraps as the payment of day long labour of the Dalits: “What sort of a life was that? After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just joothan” (Joothan 10). These kinds of questions are found in almost all the major events described by the narrators. The use of such questions is instrumental for the narrators of Dalit autobiographies to emphasize rationality of their resistance against all sorts of oppression.

There are numbers of episodic stories which are intertextualized in the Dalit autobiographies maintaining the sequences of the text of casteism, untouchability, poverty, starvation, struggle for education, oppression, patriarchy and so on in Indian caste hierarchical societies. It has already been noted that there is little difference in terms of narrative strategies between fiction and autobiography which is based on unstated pact between the reader and the writer regarding truthfulness of autobiographical events. So the autobiographies often employ the similar techniques as used by fiction.

The autobiographers use various devices such as irony, humour, satire, etc. to keep the readers alert with the narrator’s perspective of looking at the existing narrative. These devices have been used to challenge the established norms
hegemonized by the Brahmanical narratives and the hypocrisy of the high caste people. Bama, in Karukku, has criticized the hierarchical orders maintained by the Catholic Churches in Tamil Nadu especially in the appointment of the church officials and luxurious life style of nuns and sisters. Bama’s learning, as follower of the Catholic Church, of God had been that God showed great compassion for the oppressed, and Jesus was associated himself mainly with the poor. But she found something wrong in the teaching about God by the church. She writes:

All those people who had taught us, had taught us only that God is loving, kind, gentle, one who forgives sinners, patient, tender, humble, obedient. Nobody had ever insisted that God is just, righteous … There is a great deal of difference between this Jesus and the Jesus who is made known through daily pieties. The oppressed are not taught about him, but rather, are taught in an empty and meaningless way about humility, obedience, patience, gentleness. (Karukku 104)

As a nun of Catholic order she has experienced the hypocrisy of the high caste priests and sisters which has been internalized within the system of the church. Karukku reveals how the church people spent hours on the thought of eating, drinking and dressing as one their priorities inside the church. She wonders at the hypocrisy of the church, “there is ugly in saying one thing and doing another” (Ibid 107). She points out that most of the Indian Christians are Dalits, ironically they are controlled and made them enslaved by few high caste people following hierarchical priestocracy in the apparently egalitarian church.

Dalit autobiographers do engage these devices for effectiveness of their narrative agenda. In Joothan Valmiki’s statement “All the quarrels of the village would be discussed in the shape of a Round Table Conference at this same spot” (Joothan 1) hints lot of historical references and his scornful attitude to the outcome
of 1932 historic Round Table Conference which brought no significant change to the Dalit political life. Many a time the Dalit autobiographers perceive the life style they had to follow in an independent democratic country with protective constitutional rights devoid of self-respect as social security is itself an irony. The condition of the dwelling houses of Valmiki’s village was poorly constructed. As in one night, it rained heavily, many houses were collapsed. People were screaming and shouting and at such moment, the narrator’s father enquired of Mamu, the next to his neighbor in a shrilled voice whether everything was alright. Mamu replied, “Everything is alright…the back shed has fallen” (Valmiki 21). There are also the uses of irony that criticize the mainstream epics and other grand narratives. The narrator’s question before his class teacher in school as to, why the famished state of his own family was not represented in the epics like Drona’s made the whole class restless.

The similar kind of irony is found in Valmikis Joothan. Whenever, Valmiki made a mistake, the teacher would grab his shirt and insulted him. The teacher would ask, “How many pieces of pork did you eat? You must have eaten at least a pao” (Joothan 18). Even the school boys from high caste insulted him saying, “Abey Chuhreke, you eat pork” (Ibid 18). However, such insults made him recollect how the Tyagis came to Bhangi basti to eat pork in the darkness of night. He recalls, “Those who came to eat meat secretly at night, in daylight observed untouchability in front of everybody” (Ibid 18).

Gaikwad in The Branded: Uchayla describes certain situations and events with ironic undertone, such as, learning thieving skill instead of going to school for education; worshiping Bharat Blade instead of worshiping God in the temple, and
the hypocrisy of the Patils, the high caste village heads who used to fill their baskets with only meat not anything else from the Pathrut community (*The Branded* 26-27).

Limbale has also criticized the people of his own caste for their peculiar nature of habit and life style that could be led in cultured way. Limbale was greatly influenced by his father-in-law who was rational in thinking but a victim of alcohol. At the death of his father-in-law, he says, “A ‘saint-cum-villain’ had disappeared into the soil, a victim of alcoholism” (*The Outcaste* 106).

Since Dalit writing is largely a subversive narrative in its thematic expression and style, the Dalit writers have used language of their day to day use which is colloquial in nature and unrefined. Their uses of such language often arouse laughter among the readers but that is not the negation of Dalit discourse, rather it undermines the hegemony of official discourse. The Dalit autobiographers have used the device of humour in their personal narratives which is often accompanied by pathos.

It was quite difficult to search for a bridegroom for Limbale’s sisters’ marriages and a bride for himself. His mother used to request the people to find suitable matches for her children. The response of the drunken community members was rather amusing:

‘Don’t you worry. We will fix your marriage. We will also find a job for you. We know so many people we can influence. But first you must get through matriculation.’ I had to tell them that I had already passed it and was studying for MA course. They kept talking nonsense because they were drunk. ‘Boys with BA and MA degrees are useless and unemployed. You just get through your matric and come to us. We will sort out everything for you. (*The Outcaste* 98)
This kind of simultaneous praise and abuse is a part of ambivalence of grotesque realism.

The autobiographies have also used the device of symbols and images. In *Joothan* Valmiki narrates many of his tragic events using these devices. At the order of the Headmaster, he had to sweep the rooms and the playground of the school with a broom made of some twigs of a tree. Three day old broom was shedding it’s dried up leaves, and the narrator compares that broom with himself as his childhood charms were shed by the cruelty of casteism and untouchability. He says, “Frightened, I picked up the three-day-old broom. Just like me, it was shedding its dried up leaves. All that remained were the thin sticks” (Valmiki 5). In Limbale’s *The Outcaste*, we come across vivid use of images while describing his father working in the field of the landlord. He says, “He worked … His ribs looked like marks of a whip on the skin of an ox” (*The Outcaste* 35). His mother’s feeling of loneliness, after her divorce by her husband, compared with Sita’s helplessness while searching for shelter in the Dandakaranya. (*Ibid* 36). Gaikwad in *The Branded* gives a description of his hut which was poorly constructed where they spent their life like a cluster of flies. He says: “As it was our hut was a dingy affair. We were crowded thick in it like a cluster of fleas” (Gaikwad 11).

Limbale characterises Dalit literature as ‘purposive’ and describes its purpose variously as revolutionary, transformational, and liberatory. One facet of Dalit literature’s rejection of the Brahmanical literary tradition is that it does not adhere to classical Indian aesthetics, according to which the purpose of art and literature is to evoke different emotions and feeling, such as pity, love, fear and anger. As Limbale makes it clear, Dalit literature does not share either the devotional literature’s otherworldly concerns or the bourgeois literature’s
involvement with the desires, insecurities and alienation of the individual. In this regard, he propagates that Dalit literature is neither pleasure-giving literature of fine sentiments and refined gestures, nor a narcissistic self-pitying of its kind. (Limbale 2007, 14)

Being ‘purposive’, Dalit literature is to use an old phrase, a literature of commitment. Contemporary Marathi Dalit literature emerged from a political movement – the Dalit Panthers. It is a literature of commitment. It is partly pragmatic in so far as its commitment to its social obligation as one of its moral responsibilities.

As noted by Toral Jatin Gajarawala, “Dalit literature is characterized as a literature of protest and historical revisionism, typically with an emphasis on the documentation of the violence, oppression, and the structural inequality engendered by casteism.” (Gajarawala 1-2)

Gajarawala, in his book Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste (2013), while discussing Dalit realism, speaks of three incidents of the burning of books: firstly, the burning of a collection of short stories Soz-e-vatan (Dirge of the Nation) by the Brish Raj in 1908; Secondly, the burning of Hindu sacred text Manusmriti (The Laws of Manu) by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and thirdly, the burning of Premchand’s novel Rangbhumi (The Arena) most recently by the activists of Bharatya Dalit Sahitya Academy in 2004. All these three events revolve around the epistemological crisis of the “real”. Gajarawala refers the Hindi literary critic K.P. Singh who credits Premchand’s writing for creating awareness and recognizing the hollowness of the capitalist promises of Swaraj. On the other hand, Alok Rai, a Hindi Dalit critic of Premchand, says that the concept of poetic justice
propagated by Premchand is “the underlying idea of imagined, aesthetic worlds being, somehow, compensatory and corrective” (qtd. in Gajarawala 2013, 18). Premchand did not actually reflect a deep commitment to emphatically address the issue of Dalit oppression in Indian Hindu society. Citing Kanwal Bharti, Rai says that Premchand’s radical characters are never angry enough as found in the story “The Thakur’s Well” where “If only Gangi had fought some battle of liberation, though she may well have lost her life, but it would have become a story of the Dalit fight for recognition” (qtd. in Gajarawala 2013, 18).

As argued by Limbale, Dalit literature is revolutionary and transformational but it is not based on the fact that all Dalit writers stick to a radical ideology, such as socialism or Marxism. However, it rests on the view that, in as much as transforming the condition of the Dalit and challenging the caste system is a revolutionary cause; a literature that is entirely dedicated to this cause is, by definition, radical. The source of this radicalism is considered to be the thought and actions of Dr. Ambedkar.

Limbale argues that Dalit literature serves its radical function through its authentic representation of the Dalit reality. Through this representation, the untouchable Other finds voice to speak across the caste-line and thereby destroy the vaunted purity of the savvarna. (Limbale 14-15).