CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Preliminaries

The present research is an attempt to analyse the selected autobiographies of Indian Dalit and African American writers by applying the principles of Sociolinguistics. As Sociolinguistics is the study of language in relation to society, the selected autobiographies are studied against the socio-cultural background of their times. This chapter serves as the general introduction to the thesis as a whole. In the beginning of the chapter, an effort is made to state the aims and objectives of the study. It also justifies the rationale and significance of the study, scope and limitations. Then, the chapter presents the methodology and techniques to be used. At the end, the chapter throws light on the diachronic study of Indian Dalit and African American autobiographies. It discusses in detail the nature and concept of Indian Dalit and African American autobiographies. These two forms of literature are born out of the caste system in India and racial discrimination in United States of America. Indian Dalit and African American writers have tried to protest against inequality in the society through their autobiographical writings. Indian Dalit authors such as Sharankumar Limbale, Laxman Gaikwad and Baby Kamble and African American authors such as Booker T. Washington, Richard Wright and Maya Angelou depict not only the hostile circumstances in which Dalits and Blacks live, but also their struggle for emancipation from caste and race.

1.2 Aims and Objectives

The following are the aims and objectives of the present study:

1. To examine and analyse the sociolinguistic aspects of six selected autobiographies written by Indian Dalit and African American writers.
2. To study and analyse the effects of social dialects on the linguistic behaviour of the characters in selected autobiographies of Indian Dalit and African American writers.

3. To find out class, caste and race distinctions of characters via sociolinguistic analysis.

4. To analyse the major and minor characters against their socio-cultural background.

5. To throw light on the nature of language of minority communities in Indian and American contexts.

6. To study critically the linguistic experimentation related to morphology, phonology and syntax in the autobiographies under study.

7. To study the code mixing and code switching strategies used by the characters in the respective autobiographies.

8. To study the elements of power and solidarity operative in the selected autobiographies of the Indian Dalit and African American writers.

9. To explicate the address terms and greetings, blessings and curses, abusive terms, honorific terms and kinship terms in the Indian Dalit and African American contexts.

10. To find out unusual spellings used by the writers of the autobiographies under consideration.

11. To study diminutive expressions used by the characters in the selected autobiographies.

12. To explore other sociolinguistic features utilized by Indian Dalit and African American writers in their autobiographies.
13. To explore other sociolinguistic features such as use of punctuation marks and different type of sentences (inverted order sentence and run-on sentence) used by African American writers in their autobiographies.

1.3 Rationale and Significance of the Study

The present study is an attempt to apply the sociolinguistic approach to six autobiographies; three from Indian Dalit writers and three from African American writers. This approach examines the relationship between language and society. This study provides an additional reference for the researchers working on the area of Sociolinguistics. Sociolinguistics is very much concerned with analyzing the dialect and sociolect of language variation. One comes across the typical idiolects and sociolects in the autobiographies of Indian Dalit and African American writers, which are worth studying from the point of Sociolinguistics.

The sociolinguistic analysis of the selected autobiographies helps the readers to discover the obscure meaning of the words to enjoy the reading at its fullest. The selected authors make linguistic experimentation against the social background of their times. The language used in these autobiographies is embedded in the structural design. The use of language made by the characters in the autobiographies is interesting and appealing. Therefore, the linguistic utterances of the characters are worth studying from sociolinguistic point of view. Moreover, they make the readers aware of the socio-cultural aspects of the societies reflected in the autobiographies and enhance their ability to understand, interpret and appreciate the autobiographical narratives of marginalized groups of people.

1.4. Scope and Limitations

It is too difficult to separate language from its social background. There is variability within a community about the use of words that are tied to particular social situations. Sociolinguistics has developed ways of analyzing the links between such things. Indian Dalit and African American writers use the language of everyday life used by the downtrodden. It is interesting to study the nature of language in general and relations of language to society in particular. Different linguistic items have different
relations to society in terms of people and circumstances. It is obviously necessary to
describe these relations separately for each item.

The present research is limited to the following six autobiographies; three of Indian
Dalit and three of African American writers –


The above autobiographies are analysed applying the principles of Sociolinguistics.
The selected linguistic expressions of the characters and the selected extracts are
thoroughly examined against the socio-cultural realities that existed while these
autobiographies were being written.

1.5 Hypothesis

The selected autobiographies of Indian Dalit and African American writers portray
the picture of the Dalit and Black life. They vigorously comment on social evils like
oppression, exploitation, sufferings, poverty and dehumanization. It is, therefore,
hypothesized that the sociolinguistic concepts help to understand these realities of the
Dalit and Black life. The language used by the characters undoubtedly plays more
than a key role in identifying the nature of the characters involved in these works. It
makes the readers aware of the socio-cultural background of the characters. The social
factors such as class/caste, age, education and gender have great impact on the
language used by the characters. The sociolinguistic concepts such as dialect, idiolect
and sociolect present the social emotions and feelings of the characters towards each
other. Moreover, address terms, greetings, blessings, curses, abusive terms, honorific
terms and kinship terms used by the characters also reveal the socio-cultural
dimensions. It is also assumed that the study of the selected autobiographies with the sociolinguistic approach helps in understanding the literature of the marginalized authentically.

1.6 Methodology of the Study

The procedure followed in this research is to conduct a sociolinguistic analysis by using the terms and concepts in Sociolinguistics. The data needed for the study is taken primarily from the selected autobiographies of Indian Dalit and African American writers as well as the critical analysis and notes written on these autobiographies by other writers. The secondary sources are the valuable and dependable resources available in the area of Sociolinguistics. After discussing theories and concepts in Sociolinguistics, selected conversations are taken from the selected autobiographies and a sociolinguistic analysis is made so as to discover to what extent the concepts of Sociolinguistics have been embodied and utilized to strengthen the style of exhibiting the details of the story and to make the speeches of the characters more expressive and more understandable to the readers. The sociocultural factors such as the social class/caste, education, age, gender, power and solidarity are used as measures to study the influences on the language of the characters. At the same time, the sociolinguistic factors such as kinship terms, address terms, greetings, honorific terms, abusive expressions, code-mixing and code-switching, use of unusual spellings and initialism are taken into account while analyzing the autobiographies under consideration.

1.7 Diachronic Study of Indian Dalit Autobiography

The present study deals with the analysis of the selected autobiographies of Indian Dalit and African American writers. Therefore, it is required to discuss what an autobiography is. There are a number of theories about autobiography. Autobiography is a testimony of a person’s life. It tells us about the various events of a person’s life. It also represents life in a very artistic manner.

Autobiography is an account of a person’s life written by himself/herself. The term ‘autobiography’ appears to have been first used by Southey in 1809. Autobiography
represents not only the incidents in writer’s life but also their experiences. It portrays life in a very artistic manner. Some important definitions of autobiography are given below: According to Oxford English Dictionary: An autobiography is:

“An Individual’s account of his own life, it is a biography of yourself, it is biography, life-history, life story, life-an account of the series of events making up a person’s life”

According to Collier’s Encyclopaedia:

“Autobiography, a form of biography in which the subject is also the author; it is generally written in the first person and covers most or an important phase of the author’s life”

The word ‘autobiography’ can be divided into three different parts: ‘autos’ which means the self or ‘I’ without which the work has no meaning. The ‘bios’ (the ‘life’) is the entire life of the individual till the time of writing. Lastly, the ‘graphe’ means the act of writing. So, autobiography is the writing through which the self or the life takes a specific dimension and image.

Both the forms of autobiography (African American Autobiography and Indian Dalit Autobiography) are the production of specific period and social conditions existed in their respective countries. Let us study them one by one.

Diachronic study of Indian Dalit autobiography means a study of an account of the autobiographies written by Indian Dalit writers. In order to understand the nature and concept of Indian Dalit autobiography, it is required to know who is a Dalit and what Dalit Literature means. The terms ‘Dalit’ and ‘Dalit Literature’ are new phenomenon in the life, literature and history of India. To know how Dalit life came into existence, one has to go centuries back. The roots of Dalit life are found in the Varna system. This system has its origin in the Aryan society of ancient northern India. In the creation myth, four Varnas are said to have emanated from the Primeval Being/Brahma. It was believed that The Creator’s mouth became the Brahmin (priest), his two arms formed the Kshatriya (warrior and king), his two thighs formed the Vaishya (landowner and merchant), and from his feet were born the Shudra (artisan and servant).
This Varna system became fixed and hereditary with the emergence of Hinduism and its beliefs of pollution and rebirth. The Laws of Manu (Manusmriti), which date roughly to the 3rd century A.D. preach the sanctity of the Varnas and uphold the principles of gradation and rank. They refer to the impurity of the outcastes, while affirming the dominance to the Brahmins. Those from the lowest castes are told that their place in the caste hierarchy is due to their sins in a previous life.

Various manuscripts like the Vedas, the Upnishadas, the Bhagwat Gita, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata give an idea about the miserable life led by the Shudras. Among the writings of Hindu religious texts, *The Manusmriti* is undoubtedly the most authoritative one, legitimizing social exclusion and introducing absolute inequality as the guiding principle of social relations. It has given an inhuman and heinous life for the Dalits. In Manusmriti, Manu grants advantage to Brahmins and imposes punishment on the Shudras. There are so many Codes of *The Manusmriti* against the Shudras. Some of them are stated below:

1. For the welfare of humanity the supreme creator Brahma, gave birth to the Brahmins from his mouth, the Kshatriyas from his shoulders, the Vaishyas from his thighs and Shudras from his feet. (Ch. I-31)

2. God said the duty of a Shudra is to serve the upper Varnas faithfully with devotion and without grumbling. (Ch. I-91)

3. He who instructs Shudra pupils and he whose teacher is a Shudra shall become disqualified for being invited to a shraddh. (Ch. III-156)

4. A Shudra is unfit to receive education. The upper Varnas should not impart education or give advice to a Shudra. It is not necessary that the Shudra should know the laws and codes and hence need not be taught. Violators will go to as amrita hell. (Ch. IV-78 to 81)

5. A Brahmin can order a Shudra to serve him without any remuneration because the Shudra is created by Brahma to serve the Brahmins. Even if a Brahmin frees a Shudra from slavery the Shudra continues to be a slave as he is created for slavery. Nobody has the right to free him. (Ch. VIII-50,56)
6. A Shudra who insults a twice born man (Brahmin) with gross invectives shall have his tongue cut out; for he is of low origin. (Ch.VIII. 270.)

7. If he mentions the names and castes of the Brahmin (twice born) with contumely, an iron nail, ten fingers long, shall be thrust red hot into his mouth. (Ch.VIII. 271.)

8. If a Shudra arrogantly presumes to preach religion to Brahmins, the king shall have poured burning oil in his mouth and ears. (Ch.VIII. 272.)

9. No Shudra should have property of his own. He should have nothing of his own. The existence of a wealthy Shudra is bad for the Brahmins. A Brahman may take possession of the goods of a Shudra. (ManuVIII-417 & X129)

10. If the Shudra intentionally listens for committing to memory the vedas, then his ears should be filled with (molten) lead and lac; if he utters the vedas, then his tongue should be cut off; if he has mastered the vedas his body should be cut to pieces. (Ch.XII. 4.)

From Manu’s law book The Manusmriti and its strict compliance by the Brahmans, it may be summarized that human beings are not born equal. There is no room for individual worth and no consideration of individual honesty. The privilege goes with class i.e. an individual has to enjoy or suffer in a class because he belongs to that class. In other words, Manusmriti says that the suffering of Shudras is a part of their caste. Manu’s social order raises social outcaste which in turn assigns social injustice to the underprivileged.

The Manusmriti is the origin of the torture meted out to the Dalits. For this reason Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, terming it a document of discrimination, publicly burnt The Manusmriti on 25th December 1927 at Mahad. Since then this day is celebrated as Manavmukti Din.

After the burning of the The Manusmriti, the symbol of Brahminic slavery, Dr. Ambedkar (1995) said in Dhananjay Keer’s book:

“It is not that all the parts of The Manusmriti are condemnable, that it does not contain good principles and that Manu himself was not a sociologist and
was a mere fool. We made a bonfire of it because we view it as a symbol of injustice under which we have been crushed across the centuries. Because of Manu’s teachings we have been ground down under despicable poverty. The counts in the indictment of the hereditary Hindu priests are numerous and appalling. He is a clog on the wheel of civilization. Man is born, becomes the father of a family and then in time dies. All along the priest shadows him like an evil genius.”

Considering the above-mentioned facts, it can be said that the condition of the Shudras was miserable for many centuries. The Dalits have been subjected to painful, undermined, vulnerable and torturous kind of life in some form or the other. Their irritating and distressful life forced them to revolt against the discriminatory system based on caste hierarchy.

The condition of the Dalits was toughened by various religious/social books and by various systems proposed by the high caste Hindus. The Manusmriti prescribed atrocious kind of life for the Shudras. Manu asks Hindu people to preserve and protect Dharma and that Dharma means caste system in which Shudras are not allowed to get education. They were not allowed to learn and without acquiring the art of learning it was impossible for them to write about their own life. As a result of this, ancestors of the Dalits lived the life of unending injustice, torture and heinous treatment. No Dalit was declared literate until the mid-nineteenth century. Consequently, no literature commenting on the distressful life of the Dalits was existed. Hindu or Brahminical literature did not portray the Dalit life and talk about aspirations of the oppressed. There was no place for love, compassion and fraternity in the Hindu Varna system. Accordingly, the literature of the upper caste Hindus did not deal with the sufferings of the Shudras and the Atishudras. Therefore, Dalit literature emerged as a symbol of revolt against the Brahmanical mode of writing. Dalit writers came out of the blue after the doors of education were opened for them by the social and educational reformers such as Mahatma Phule and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar.
To know about Dalit literature, it is imperative to know what the word ‘Dalit’ means. The word ‘Dalit’ has been defined in various ways by different scholars and writers. Normally, non-Dalit writers and intellectuals have invented its root in Sanskrit. It is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘dal’ which means ground, crushed, decimated - a condition in which the Dalits find themselves ever since the dawn of the caste system in India. It also means downtrodden, oppressed or exploited or condemned to peripheral living. It is said that the word ‘dal’ means low, weak, poor and helpless in Hebrew. All these synonymous words used to describe Dalit clearly suggest that it is a section of people at the lowest stratum of Hindu society, which suffers from inherent denial of dignity. In other words, Dalits are the people who are socially degraded, economically impoverished and educationally and culturally excluded.

The word ‘Dalit’ is employed to identify the people who belong to the low castes in the Indian context. It also refers to the caste-oriented idea and not simply the suffering people of any community. They were addressed by several other names and the Dalit community heard it with resentfulness. Nevertheless, this word is well approved by the entire community, because it does not undermine their dignity and group them under one fold.

The term ‘Dalit’ has different meanings for different people. In India, two divergent personalities, Mahatma Gandhi invented the term Harijan (God’s people) for the Dalits/untouchables and the doyen of Dalit emancipation Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, himself of untouchable caste, in the Constitution of India (1950) gave official recognition to Dalit as Scheduled Castes people. Dr. Ambedkar, very often in his writings, used different terms for ‘Dalit’ depending upon the contexts. He used Depressed Classes, a term acceptable within the Imperial official setting, Scheduled Castes, a term obtaining in the field of competitive politics and policies of social welfare, as in the Scheduled Castes Federation in 1942, ‘Pad Dalit’, “those crushed under the feet of the Hindu system”, used while addressing his own social constituency, and ‘bahishkrut’, while addressing high caste Hindu adversaries. However, Dr. Ambedkar, in his book Ostracised Bharat defines Dalithood in the following comprehensive way:

“Dalithood is a kind of life condition that characterises the exploitation, suppression and marginalisation of Dalit people by the social, economic,
cultural and political domination of the upper castes’ Brahmanical ideology”.

In spite of this, a number of thinkers, writers and researchers tried to define the concept of the ‘Dalit’. James Massey (1991), explains Dalit as:

“The burst, the split, the broken or torn asunder, the trodden down, the scattered, the crushed and the destroyed”.

The clearer definition of the term ‘Dalit’ in its contemporary usage comes from a letter written to Eleanor Zelliot by Professor Gangadhar Pantawane (1992):

“To me, Dalit is not a caste. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. Dalit believes in humanism. He rejects existence of God, rebirth, soul, sacred books that teach discrimination, fate, and heaven, because these have made him a slave”.

Sharankumar Limbale, (2004) describes Dalit as:

“Dalits are the upper caste Hindu’s Other”.

Baburao Bagul, (2009) major ideologue of the Dalit Panther and an award winning Dalit writer said:

“Dalit’ is the name for total revolution; it is revolution incarnate”.

Arjun Dangle (2009) defines Dalit as:

“Masses exploited and oppressed economically, socially, culturally, in the name of religion and other factors”.
Nowadays, a word ‘Dalit’ is used by most of the Maharashtrian untouchables as a comprehensive ground-breaking group specifically designating those social sections of Indian society which are culturally, socially and physically repressed by powerful segment. Eleanor Zelliot (1992) says:

“In the term and concept Dalit itself, there is an inherent denial of dignity, a sense of pollution and an acceptance of the karma theory that justifies the caste hierarchy.”  

The question which then arises is how we construct the conceptual framework of that extended sociological definition. A study of Dalit autobiographies seems to bring a significant contribution to answer this question within an anthropological and sociological framework.

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, a social reformer and a revolutionary thinker, used the word ‘Dalit’ to describe the outcastes and untouchables as the oppressed and broken victims of the caste-ridden society. Later on, the Dalit Panthers (a revolutionary group formulated on the basis Black Panthers) approved this word to identify themselves with dignity. The term has got a more constructive meaning. This new expression has given the Dalits a social status as a group of people which has been reduced by social convention to the deplorable state or condition.

The above discussion makes it clear that the social reformists, literary analysts, social scientists and political thinkers have different perceptions about the term ‘Dalit’. Now, let us see how Dalit literary movement emerged and passing through various stages becomes an indelible part of mainstream literature.

The history of Dalit literary movement can be traced back to centuries. The Dalits have been deprived of the right to education for centuries. The contemporary writers have paid no attention to the social life and culture of Dalits. In fact, the then cultural conditions, the writers’ mind set and the traditional values were the real obstacles which did not allow the writers to portray the Dalit life. The miseries, sorrows, servitudes and misfortunes of the Dalits lay much beyond the verbal ability of the contemporary writers. However, some writers had taken initiative to put forward the
realities of the Dalit life. The first one is the saint-poet Chokhamela (14th Century AD) who wrote many Abhangas (devotional songs). Through his compositions, he appeals to reduce the disparity in society and eliminate the struggle between classes.

Tracing the development of the Dalit Literature, Eleanor Zelliot (1978), in her essay ‘Dalit-New Cultural Context for an old Marathi Word,’ states:

“While Dalit Literature as a school, a self-conscious movement, is a product of the 1960s. Individual writers from among the Untouchables appear in the fourteenth century and again in the Mahar Movement, which began in the late nineteenth century....The Bhakti movement, begun traditionally by Dyaneshwar in the thirteenth century, was joined by saint-poets from almost all Marathi-speaking castes, including the Mahar poet-Chokhamela.”

Afterward, the British came to India (1757) with new knowledge and new literature. Indian scholars were introduced to the English literature through which they become aware of the life of the weaker people whose conditions were similar to that of the Shudras. As a result, some social reformers like Phule, Agarkar, Gokhale and Ranade started talking about misery and servitude of the Shudras. They criticized the Varna system and demanded social, economic and political reconstruction.

In pre-Ambedkar period, though the term ‘Dalit Literature’ did not exist, the Dalit writers like Gopalbaba Valangkar, Pandit Kondiram and Kisan Phagoji Bansod attacked the Manusmriti and the cruel practices of Hinduism through their writings. But nobody took notice of their writings.

Later, Dalit literature started showing its existence at the hands of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1828-90), Prof. S.M. Mate (1886-1957) and Dr. Bheemrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956). Through their works and writings, they raised the problems and issues of the Dalits which inspired many Dalit writers to come forth and write about their own life. The Dalit literary movement gained pace with the active support of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s revolutionary ideals. He inspired and initiated the creative minds of India to enforce the socio-cultural upsurge for the total emancipation of the Dalits. Dr.
Ambedkar sharpens the consciousness of the untouchables as a class and prepares them as a powerful constituent of the present-day social system. All Dalit writers gratefully and gracefully recognize Dr B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Phule as the source of inspiration of their literary practice. In this connection, Arjun Dangle (2009) states:

“While both Gautama Buddha and Mahatma Phule revolted against the unjust class structure and while it is true their teachings and ideas are inspiring even today. A historical and objective examination of the situation reveals that it was Dr. Ambedkar who was the enabling factor in Dalit literature because of his ideas outlook towards life and his struggle to achieve what he felt just.”

In this connection, Waman Nimbalkar (2006), one of the contemporary Dalit writers, opines:

“The immense potential of Dr. Ambedkar and his philosophy was not restricted to himself or any one particular individual. He handed over to them the flares of his philosophy for development...His thoughts contained a graph of the progress of the people at the grass roots of the society. For this, Dr. Ambedkar’s life itself had become a revolution. This revolution had changed the consciousness of the Dalits...That is why, Dr. Ambedkar and his philosophy is the source of Dalit literature. The roots of new consciousness can be traced in the thoughts of Buddha.”

In this regard, Eleanor Zelliot (2001), says:

“Dr. Ambedkar’s position among Dalits can be equated with that of a guru, one who leads his disciples to develop their own identity and wisdom.
Dr. Ambedkar’s stance against all that he saw as evil, as harmful to the lowly and hence to the country, is a source of mobilization. Further, Dr. Ambedkar stands tall as a symbol of achievement.… Ambedkar’s Dalit is a man or woman filled with pride and self-respect. Social movements thrive on pride. The multi-faceted Dr. Ambedkar stands for both qualities: pride and self-respect.”

The above statements make us clear that the teachings and ideas of Dr. Ambedkar are the source of inspiration for young Dalit writers. He was the ideologue who shaped the tradition of revolutionary thinking of almost a generation of Dalits.

Dalit literature is the literature that uses Dr. Ambedkar’s teachings as its foundation. The Dalits have vital impact of the firm directives given by Dr. Ambedkar on their lives. On May 2, 1954, in his address to the Vidarbha Literary Conference; Dr. Ambedkar (1954) said:

“We are neglecting our lives, our duties and our culture. If we do a little 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. The Sita in your novels and stories is now crossing the ‘Lakshmanresha’ - the forbidden line. Draupadi’s clothes are being taken away in the court of Duryodhan - Dushyant does not recognise Shakuntala, she is getting exiled. That is why I earnestly want to tell the writers “manifest in your literary forms the noble life-values and cultural values. Do not have a narrow, limited horizon. Enlarge it. Do not keep your relations restricted within four walls. Let them
Dalit writers seem to be attempting to accomplish the instruction that Dr. Ambedkar has given to the writers and representatives of literary circles. As a part of this, some Dalit youths graduated from Siddharth College founded by Dr. Ambedkar had set up a literary body called the Siddhartha Sahitya Sangh. Later on, this Sangh was recognized as Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh. In the first conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha (Maharashtra Dalit Literary Society) held at Mumbai in 1958, young Dalit literary activists coined the term ‘Dalit literature’. The primary motive of Dalit literature is to give a voice to the relentless sufferings of the Dalits and make other people aware of the realities of the Dalit life. Dalit literature, which looks at history and current events from a Dalit point of view, has made a considerable growth to occupy a place in the body of Indian literary expression. Let us see how it becomes an important and distinct part of Indian literature.

Marathi literature is considered as the forerunner of all modern Dalit literature in India. It is the outcome of the socio-cultural changes, which took place in Maharashtra after independence. The only remarkable thing happened during this period was the rise of Anna Bhau Sathe on the horizon of Marathi literature in general and Dalit literature in particular. It was almost for the first time that through his writings the heart-rending portrayal of the sorrows, helplessness and exploitation of the Dalits and the neglected became available in Marathi literature. The stories of Anna Bhau Sathe concentrated on social groups that are the Mangs, Ramoshis, Makadwale, Chamars, dacoits and criminals. He was a Mang by caste and lived in extreme poverty. He was indeed the ‘insider’ participant in and observer of the process of victimization. His stories, therefore, reflect his acute sensitivity and genuineness of perception. Gail Omvedt (1987), in her article ‘Dalit literature in Maharashtra: Literature of Social and Protest and Revolt in Western India,’ claims:
“...though Dalit literature as “movement” began only in the late 1960s and early 1970s, one of the most important Dalit writers and a major forerunner of the movement was Anna Bhau Sathe (1920-1968). He was a writer of diverse forms. His novels and short stories remain avidly read even today, and in fact up to the present no equivalent Dalit novelist has emerged. The sorties tell simple heroic or tragic tales of villages.”

The Dalit literature has become one of the most significant trends during the sixties. It has started making a mark on the literary horizon of India and has grown in volume and quality. The writers like Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav and Shankarrao Kharat created Dalit literature with the Little Magazine Movement. Baburao Ramchandra Bagul (1930-2008) was the main exponent of Dalit literature in Maharashtra. He started an era of revolutionary writing in Marathi literature. The extreme poverty, misery and oppression that he experienced in his childhood are evident in his works. His collection of short stories Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti (When I robbed a caste) – 1963 Maran Swast Hot Aahe (Death is becoming cheap) -1969 aroused a storm and broke all norms of conventional story writing in Marathi literature. Sood (Revenge) – 1970 and two novels Aghori (1980) and Kondi (2000) are portrayal of the miseries, frustrations and struggles of the downtrodden. He was the first writer who associated Dalit literature with African American literature and initiated the internationalization of Dalit literature. After Bagul, Namdev Dhasal’s Golpitha (1972), a collection of poetry, expresses the anguish and aspirations of Dalits in India and the inherent, suppressed urge to emerge out of centuries of darkness and suffering to claim their just heritage and space in society. The disapproval and rebellious style of his poems show his extreme hatred for the system. It is apparent that the persistent output of Dalit Literature by its representation of the lives of the most marginalized shook the Marathi mainstream literary tradition to its core. Following Golpitha, came a flood of poetry. Great poets like Narayan Survey, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Arun Kamble, Josef Macqwan, Sharankumar Limbale, Arun Dangle, and many other poets wrote stunningly new Indian Dalit poetry in the sixties and seventies. A large number of readers were influenced by their liberated spirit, straight and strong style, and poignant poetic images used in Dalit poetry. They portrayed the life and struggles of
the low caste people. This era, from the end of 1960s to the middle of 1980s, can be called the ‘golden age’ of modern Marathi Dalit Literature.


Broadly speaking, since the 1970s, an increasing number of poets and writers from the Dalit communities of the states of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have been producing literary works such as poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies representing the themes of caste oppression, untouchability, poverty and revolution. Let us have state wise review of Dalit literature.

The Dalit literary movement in Tamil Nadu had a late start as compared to Maharashtra and Karnataka. In the early 1990s, the Dalit movement first manifested itself as a literary phenomenon in Tamil Nadu. A group of young and talented writers, with their creative force, challenged the smugness of the well-established writers in the literary field. Dalit writers want to remove the social exploitation and caste inequalities in Indian society. Dalit literature managed to mark its footprints in the Tamil literary space, only when the writers began recording their experiential reality in the autobiographical mode. The romanticized, sentimentalized Dalits of Poomani and Daniel find an authentic voice and affirmative presence in the writings of Sivakami, Edayavendan, Unjai Rajan Abimani, Bama, Anbadavan, Gunasekaram, Imaiayam and others. The first Dalit novel in Tamil written by a woman Dalit writer, Sivakami, was published in 1989. The novel, Pazhiyana Kazhidalum (1989) discusses the issue of Dalit leadership and draws attention to the drawbacks existed in an imitative model. Bama’s novels focus on caste-based and gender discrimination. They
also portray caste-discrimination practised by the Roman Catholic clergy of South India. Her autobiographical novel, *Karukku* (1992), records the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu. The other notable writer, Imai Yam whose original name is V Annamalai, portrayed the lives of Dalit washermen in his debut novel *Koveru Kazhuthaigal* (1994).

Tamil Dalit writers have tried their hands at various genres for self-articulation. Collections of short stories have been published throughout the nineties and thereafter. Abimani has brought out three collections: *Nokkadu* (1993), *Tettam* (2001) and *Oorchoru* (2003). Edayavendan has three collections to his credit: *Nandanar Teru* (1991), *Vadai Paudum Vazhvy* (1994) and *Tai Mann* (1996). Imai Yam’s *Mann Baram* was published in 2004 while two of his novels, *Koveru Kazhudaigal* (1994) and *Arumugam* (1999) had made a significant contribution to debates and discussions on Dalit discourse in Tamil Nadu.

Sharankumar Limbale (2013), noted Marathi Dalit writer, on the progress made in the Dalit movements in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, says:

“Our pains and problems are the same. They compel us to come under the common umbrella of being a Dalit irrespective of whether we are Tamil, Marathi or Punjabi. Language is often a barrier, but our problems help us surmount the hurdle.”

Limbale was reluctant to sub-categorize the Dalits on the basis of states or languages. He believes that the problems of Dalits are same throughout the country. The common nature of problems forces us to be united.

In Andhra Pradesh, the Dalit Literature originated mainly from the atrocities on Dalits in Karamchedu (1985) and Tsunduru/Chundur (1991). The Karamchedu episode marks a turning point in the growth of the Dalit movement. Various organizations of Dalit work for the welfare of the Dalit masses. In Andhra Pradesh, the Dalit Maha Sabhas have produced a new generation of Dalit scholars, intellectuals and
philosophers whose writings sharply reflect the changing perceptions and consciousness of Dalit masses. They dealt with the Dalit questions in their writings.

In recent times, Dalit literature has broadened its range to perceive the world from the Dalit angle. Some of the writers consciously made efforts to expand the scope and canvas of ‘Dalitism’ beyond one’s own caste group. This opened up avenues for the writers from other low caste groups, religious minorities, women, ex-criminals, and social castaways. To name some of them are: Daya Pawar, Arun Kamble, Shantabai Kamble, Krushna Kamble, Raja Dhale, Namdev Dhasal, Bandhu Madhav, Arjun Dangle, Laxman Mane, Laxman Gaikwad, Hari Narake, Sharankumar Limbale, Narendra Jadhav, Waman Nimbalkar, Bhimsen Dethe, Baby Kamble and Bhau Panchbhai. All these writers in their own ways, capacities and capabilities advanced the work that Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had started.

The above discussion throws light on how Dalit literature has passed through different stages of development to make its own place in the field of Indian literature. An autobiography constitutes major part of Dalit literature.

In the Indian literary context, it is generally believed that the practice of writing autobiography is a decent and highly regarded mode of expression. It is limited mainly to the section of people belonging to the upper castes. The elite Hindus have written their autobiographies in English language with which Dalits were completely unfamiliar. As a result, the majority of the Dalit population remained untouched by the practice of writing the ‘self’. Since Dalits had hardly any scope to be literate in Hindu society it took them three more centuries than their upper caste counterparts to write the same genre.

M.K. Naik (1982) in A History of Indian English Literature, traces Hazari’s An Indian Out-caste: The Autobiography of an Untouchable (1951), as the first Dalit autobiography written under the pseudonym of Marcus Abraham Malik. He was the first man from the depressed classes to write an autobiography. M.K. Naik views that Hazari’s autobiography has broken the long lasting silence in terms of Dalit representation. Hazari had observed and experienced the caste discrimination throughout his life as a student and as a servant.
According to K. Satya Narayana (2005), Dr. Ambedkar’s *Waiting for Visa*, published after his death, is also considered as the first Dalit autobiography. He says that it may not be out of place to know what R.C.P. Sinha’s views regarding this matter:

“R.C.P. Sinha, a scholar on Indian autobiographies in English describes an Indian Outcaste: The Autobiography of an Untouchable (1951) as the, first autobiography of an untouchable known as Hazari. This autobiography is the story of the struggles of an untouchable in the early decades of 20th century. It was written in 1930s but was published very late in 1951 (R.C.P Sinha, P.71). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the leader of Dalits, wrote six autobiographical ‘illustrations’, as Ambedkar refers to them, titled ‘Waiting for Visa’ which was published after his death. (Vasant Moon, pp.665-71) He discusses some of ‘the events’ in his life in order to bring the oppression of untouchability into public, to the notice of the foreigners. Scholars have indicated that these six autobiographical extracts might have been written between 1946-47.”18

This statement suggests that Dr. Ambedkar has written six autobiographical extracts entitled as ‘*Waiting for Visa*’ which portrays some of the incidents in his life. This document might have enabled Dalit writers to make serious attempts of writing autobiography. In the beginning, the writers provided the record of the sufferings and humiliations to create socio-cultural and political awareness among their communities. Later on, Dalit autobiography articulated the life experiences of an individual which encompass the general condition of the whole Dalit community. The Dalit writers raised their voice against the heinous system of untouchability and caste discrimination existed in Indian social structure. In this connection, Omprakash Valmiki (2003) asserts:

“Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creation. We have grown up in a

In spite of such a considerable development, mainstream critics have questioned the literariness of the Dalit autobiographical narratives, criticized them as formless, artless outburst of Dalit writers’ life experiences and have become repetitive and stereotypical. Answering the criticism, some Dalit writers claimed that authenticity of experience is the most important characteristic feature of Dalit writing. The Dalit writers lived the life full of experiences that have the potential to influence large number of people. In this regard, Om Prakash Valmiki (2003) writes:

“Dalit writers should write autobiographies so that not only our history will stay alive but also our true portrayals of wrong doers. Dalit autobiography will provide inspiration to our future generations.”

The above discussion has highlighted the historical development of Dalit autobiography with critical comments and observations. Now, let us discuss in detail the historical development of African American autobiography.
1.8 Diachronic Study of African American Autobiography

To deal with African American Autobiographies is to deal with the length of nearly four hundred years of African American literary history. The history of African Americans is one of the most disrupted and violent among the histories of most national and ethnic groups. It would be incomplete to deal with African American literary writings without mentioning slavery. The slavery was the everyday reality which has shaped lives of the black people. The black authors brought the change with the power of the written words. The other reason is that slavery was the central motif of great number of the contemporaneous black writing, both before and after the Civil War.

The beginning of slave trade in America can be precisely dated back to the Dutch ship which brought about twenty slaves to be sold as indentured servants in Jamestown in the Virginia State of America in 1619. With this began slavery in America. This was the beginning of sufferings, oppression and injustice for the black people. At the same time, this incident also signifies the strong will to survive and live decently and struggle for rights.

African slaves were taken to West Indies in exchange for sugar, tobacco and wine, and then sold for goods in Massachusetts. In 1641, Massachusetts became the first North American colony to recognize slavery as a legal institution. The slavery rose with the growth of the plantation system. The shipping of slaves continued especially in Southern part of USA where plantations needed a large number of agricultural labourers. Slaves worked on large plantations or small farms in the South. They were divided into field hands, skilled workers, and house servants with one or two drivers. Many slaves were used as a working force to construct roads. However, the lowest and the hardest labour was a field hand. On small farms, slaves worked in the fields with the owners. Therefore, they had much closer contact with white people and other slaves. House servants and the drivers had the highest status. During harvest, slaves had to toil in the field for sixteen hours a day. If they did not work, they would be whipped to maintain discipline at the plantation.

During the century of the Atlantic slave trade, close to two million slaves were brought to the American South from Africa and the West Indies. Approximately
twenty percent of the population of the American South over the years has been African American. However, the large numbers of black people maintained as a labour force. The ruling class with the principle of white supremacy became the powerhouse of southern race affairs. The culture of racism supported the whole range of discrimination and sanctioned a complex code of speech, behavior and social practices. This culture, ultimately, helped to make white supremacy seem not only legitimate but also natural and inevitable.

In the antebellum South, the economic foundation supported the structure of white supremacy. Black people developed their sense of identity, communal values, and cultural autonomy by making use of opportunities within a complex structure of give-and-take. The relationships between slave and slaveholder made possible a functional economic system. In spite of the domination of this system, slaves started searching for freedom.

Defeat in the Civil War harshly damaged social, political, and economic hierarchies of the contemporary structure. After the Civil War, the Southern ruling class was bound to settle in new requirements of race relations. For African Americans, the end of slavery brought hope for the first time to get control of their own lives. After Emancipation, however, most black Southerners drawn into an exploitative sharecropping system. Unlike many poor whites, the rural black masses exposed to segregation rule for the whole life. This regime was designed not simply to separate the races but to create a permanent labouring from the slave population of the antebellum era. The white slavery order banned all kinds of social manifestations and denied the reason and soul of the slaves. Black people need immensely strong will and determination to come out of these hostile conditions. Literacy was the fundamental first step to get themselves free from the ill will of the white majority. The process of becoming free via literature had been started even before the abolition of slavery.

Emancipation Proclamation (1863) declared the abolishment of the institution of slavery. It was a declaration made by Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America. Lincoln announced that all slaves in the Confederate territories were freed. These territories were in rebellion against the United States at the time of the
Civil war (1860 -1865). Though slavery was officially abolished after the Civil War, the hostile social atmosphere continued. The violent racism, similar to the antebellum times, continued with full strength. Blacks were deprived of opportunities in employment. As slaves, they had little or no access to education. They had to learn secretly, under the threat of brutal punishment from their masters. The strength of this threat equals with the strength of blacks’ desire and pursuit to be literate. In defiance of the masters’ exploitation of literacy as an important means of communication, black people invested tenacious endeavour to revolt and step out of ignorance that was assigned to them by the white oppressors. Learning to read and write was like an act of getting some degree of control over themselves. It was also a starting point for the development of an independent African American literature that was crucial in obtaining independence and social status.

During the initial phase, the two groups- African and American- were incompatible. The oppressed African group had to fight for the right to decent human life as the Americans denied them status. Gradually, blacks started to assert themselves and heavier emphasis fell on the “American” rather than on the “African”. Finally, the groups end with incorporation of the black culture into the American and the two get together to create a unified and specific African-American culture and literature.

African American literature emerged with the bravest and most determined black authors. They were firm to come out of the disgraced black image entrenched in the white people’s perception before the emancipation. These writers, using the powerful medium - written word, stepped into the public sphere to correct the distorted and completely negative black image.

Early writings from the antebellum era engaged in revealing the truth about real lives of slaves. Until then, slavery was publicly known as advantageous labour system. The writers attempted to portray the genuine African American character since the white conception of it was based on negative stereotypical picturing of blacks. These two truths were the initial aims of black people’s (or still slaves at the initial period of African American literature) literature. This writing was considered as the evidence of black people’s reason and creative intellect. Through the literature, African Americans created an opportunity of building their own image. They also established
their own strong public voice. Eventually, their literature widely gained public respect.

One of the most valuable sources available for understanding the experiences of slaves in the American South is the testimony that they themselves produced in a variety of ways, both during and long after the existence of the peculiar institution. These testimonials are referred as slave narratives which include memoirs and autobiographies written by fugitive slaves. The stories as well as oral interviews of former slaves that recorded their memories of life during slavery constituted both antebellum and postbellum narratives. The writings also revealed characters of slave owners, plantation overseers, clergy, and, often, the impact slavery had on slaves and white people, rich as well as poor. The authors of slave narratives were very honest to their writings. They sincerely attempted to portray the picture of their lives and struggles. Their writings served as a means of persuading the American people of the perversion of slavery. The slaves not only demonstrated their literacy but also their intellect as well through the texts. Slave narratives displayed powerful logical stances and raised arguments and questions against slavery.

The genre of slave narratives is generally divided into three categories: biographies, autobiographies and fiction. Autobiographies by former slaves were first published in the late 18th century and early 19th century. Before the Civil War approximately 65 narratives were published in English by authors such as Harriet Jacobs, Solomon Northup and William Wells. The pre-emancipation narratives, as a means of advancing the antislavery argument, focused on the oppression of slavery and condemned the institution of slavery. These narratives were more success stories which portrayed the triumphs of former slaves over the past and visions of a more prosperous future. The most famous pre-war narrative is that of Frederick Douglass, and the most famous post-war narrative is that of Booker T. Washington. According to William Andrews (1993):

“Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, autobiographies of former slaves dominated the Afro-American narrative
In the intellectual tradition of African American Literature, autobiography enjoys a dominating position and special privilege. According to William L. Andrews, African Americans had been dictating and writing first-person accounts of their lives for almost a century before the first black American novel appeared in 1853. As a part of African American literature, the development of African American autobiography roughly corresponds to the four distinctive phases of other forms of African American writings as follows:

(1) ‘The antebellum period’ from 1760 when the first African American Autobiographical work, Briton Hammon’s *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprizing Deliverance of Briton Hammon, A Negro Man-Servant to General Winslow*, was published, up to 1865 when the Civil War ended, a period which saw both formative and quickly developing stages of African American autobiography especially from the 1830s to 1860s when there appeared the first peak of African American Autobiography – the slave narratives. They relate to the eleven states of the Old Confederacy, an area that included approximately one third of the population of the United States at the time when slave narratives were most widely read. As historical sources, slave narratives present slave life primarily in the American South from the invaluable perspective of first-hand experience. Increasingly, in the 1840s and 1850s, they revealed the struggles of people of colour in the North, as fugitives from the South recorded the disparities between America’s ideal of freedom and the reality of racism in the so-called “free states.” After the Civil War, former slaves continued to record their experiences under slavery, partly to ensure that the newly-united nation did not forget what had threatened its existence, and partly to affirm the dedication of the ex-slave population to social and economic progress.

(2) The maturing years roughly from 1865 to 1910, also known as the “postbellum period” or the “reconstruction era”. This period saw a widespread fashion of slave narration from the South to the North both in quality and quantity with W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington as the two giants.
(3) The quiescent years from 1910 to 1960 which experienced two important black arts movements: the Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Movement between the mid-1910s and mid-1930s with Langstone Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay and Marcus Garvey as representatives and the Chicago Renaissance from the 1930s to 1940s of which Richard Wright was the most prominent and influential; and

(4) The flourishing years after 1960s which saw a resurgence of interest in autobiographical writing with Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Anne Moody, Jill Nelson, Jake Lamar, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Lorene Cary as pivotal writers.

The autobiographical narratives of former slaves comprise one of the most extensive and influential traditions in African American literature and culture. Until the Depression era slave narratives outnumbered novels written by African Americans. Some of the classic texts of American literature, including the two most influential nineteenth-century American novels, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and such prize-winning contemporary novels as William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), bear the direct influence of the slave narrative. Some of the most important revisionist scholarship in the historical study of American slavery in the last forty years has marshalled the slave narratives as key testimony. Slave narratives and their fictional descendants have played a major role in national debates about slavery, freedom, and American identity that have challenged the conscience and the historical consciousness of the United States ever since its founding. The nature of African American Autobiography is all-inclusive. In this connection, William L. Andrews (1993) asserts:

“As criticism of African American autobiography continues to develop, its circle inexorably expands to include not only those North American voices hereto muted but also pan-American and pan-African traditions from which we can learn much about what is African and what is American about African American autobiography.” 22
In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, slave narratives were an important means of opening a dialogue between blacks and whites about slavery and freedom. The most influential slave narratives of the antebellum era were designed to enlighten white readers about both the realities of slavery as an institution and the humanity of black people as individuals deserving of full human rights. The widespread consumption of slave narratives in the nineteenth-century United States and their continuing prominence in literature provoke reflection and debate among their readers, particularly on questions of race, social justice, and the meaning of freedom.

Slave narratives record the evolution of white supremacy in the South from eighteenth-century slavery through early twentieth-century segregation and disfranchisement. As autobiography, these narratives give voice to generations of black people who, despite being written off by white southern literature, still found a way to bequeath a literary legacy of enormous collective significance to the South and the United States. Expected to concentrate primarily on eye-witness accounts of slavery, many slave narrators become eye-witnesses as well, revealing their struggles, sorrows, aspirations, and triumphs in compellingly personal story-telling. Usually, the antebellum slave narrator portrays slavery as a condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual deprivation, a kind of hell on earth. Impelled by faith in God and a commitment to liberty and human dignity (the slave narrative often stresses) comparable to that of America’s Founding Fathers, the slave undertakes an arduous quest for freedom that climaxes in his or her arrival in the North. In many antebellum narratives, the attainment of freedom is signalled not simply by reaching the free states, but by renaming oneself and dedicating one’s future to antislavery activism.

Advertised in the abolitionist press and sold at antislavery meetings throughout the English-speaking world, a significant number of antebellum slave narratives went through multiple editions and sold in the tens of thousands. This popularity was not solely attributable to the publicity the narratives received from the antislavery movement. Readers could see that, as one reviewer put it in 1849, “the slave who endeavors to recover his freedom is associating with himself no small part of the
romance of the time.” Selling in the tens of thousands, the most popular antebellum narratives by writers such as Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and Harriet Jacobs, stressed how African Americans survived in slavery, making a way out of no way, oftentimes subtly resisting exploitation, occasionally fighting back and escaping in search of better prospects elsewhere in the North, the Midwest, Canada, or Europe. Not surprisingly, in their own era and in ours, the most memorable of these narratives evoke the national myth of the American individual’s quest for freedom and for a society based on “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Slave narrators such as Douglass, Brown, and Jacobs wrote with a keen sense of their regional identity as Southern expatriates (the forerunners, quite literally, of more famous literary southerners in the twentieth century who left the South to write in the North). Knowing that the land of their birth had produced the likes of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, southern-born slave narrators were often keen to contrast the lofty human rights ideology of Jefferson’s “Declaration of Independence” with his real-world status as a slaveholder. While the autobiographies of the men of power and privilege in the nineteenth-century South are not read widely today, the slave narrative’s focus on the conflict between alienated individuals and the oppressive social order of the Old South has spurred the re-evaluation of many hitherto submerged southern autobiographical and narrative forms, including the diaries of white women.

In most post-Emancipation slave narratives, slavery is depicted as a kind of crucible in which the resilience, industry, and ingenuity of the slave was tested and ultimately validated. Thus, the slave narrative argued the readiness of the freedman and freedwoman for full participation in the post-Civil War social and economic order. The biggest selling of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century slave narratives was Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery* (1901), a classic American success story. Because *Up from Slavery* extolled black progress and interracial cooperation since emancipation, it won a much greater hearing from Southern Whites than was accorded those former slaves whose autobiographies detailed the legacy of injustices burdening blacks in the post-war South. One reason to create a complete collection of post-Civil War ex-slave narratives is to give voice to the many former slaves who shared neither Washington’s comparatively benign assessment of slavery and
segregation nor his rosy view of the future of African Americans in the South. Another reason to extend the slave narrative collection well into the twentieth century is to give black women’s slave narratives, the preponderance of which were published after 1865, full representation as contributions to the tradition.

Slave and ex-slave narratives are important not only for what they tell us about African American history and literature, but also because they reveal to us the complexities of the dialogue between whites and blacks in this country in the last two centuries, particularly for African Americans. This dialogue is implicit in the very structure of the antebellum slave narrative, which generally focuses on an African American’s narrative but is prefaced by a white-authored text. Some slave narratives elicited replies from whites that were published in subsequent editions of the narrative (the second, Dublin edition of Frederick Douglass’s 1845 Narrative is a case in point). Other slave narratives, such as The Confessions of Nat Turner (1831), gave rise to novels implicitly or explicitly intended to defend the myth of the South, such as John Pendleton Kennedy’s Swallow Barn (1832), traditionally regarded as the first important plantation novel. The slave narrative from the early nineteenth century onward was a vehicle for dialogue over slavery and racial issues between whites and blacks in the North and the South. When reactionary white southern writers and regional boosters of the 1880s and 1890s decanted myths of slavery and the moonlight-and-magnolias plantation to a nostalgic white northern readership, the narratives of former slaves were one of the few resources that readers of the late nineteenth century could examine to get a reliable, first-hand portrayal of what slavery had actually been like.

Modern black autobiographies such as Richard Wright’s Black Boy (1945) and The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965) testify to the influence of the slave narrative on the first-person writing of post-World War II African Americans. Beginning with Margaret Walker’s Jubilee (1966) and extending through such contemporary novels as Ernest J. Gaines’s The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971), Sherley Ann William’s Dessa Rose (1986), Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987), and Charles Johnson’s Middle Passage (1990), the “neo-slave narrative” has become one of the most widely read and discussed forms of African American literature. These autobiographical and fictional descendants of the slave narrative confirm the
continuing importance and vitality of its legacy. In the struggle for personal, political, and cultural independence, these and other autobiographies play a major role in the communications network linking the black writer to his other audiences. These narratives also articulate emerging forms of personal identity which pose important new issues for social scientists and philosophers.

Autobiography holds a position of priority, indeed many would say preeminence, among the narrative traditions of black America. African Americans had been dictating and writing first-person accounts of their lives for almost a century before the first black American novel appeared in 1853. It is significant that this novel, William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*, was subtitled *A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* and was authored by a man who had made his initial literary fame as a fugitive slave autobiographer.

It was the eighteenth-century slave narrator who first sang into print the “long black song” (Houston A. Baker, 1972) of black America’s quest for freedom. Since then, African American autobiography has testified to the ceaseless commitment of people of colour to realize the promise of their American birthright and to articulate their achievements as individuals and as persons of African descent. Perhaps, more than any other literary form in black American letters, autobiography has been recognized and celebrated since its inception as a powerful means of addressing and altering sociopolitical as well as cultural realities in the United States. Nineteenth-century abolitionists sponsored the publication of the narratives of escaped slaves out of a conviction that first person accounts of those victimized by and yet triumphant over slavery would mobilize white readers more profoundly than any other kind of antislavery discourse. A similar belief in modern black American autobiography’s potential to liberate white readers from racial prejudice, ignorance, and fear led Rebecca Chalmers Barton to publish *Witnesses for Freedom: Negro Americans in Autobiography* in 1948, the first book-length scholarly study of African American (or for that matter any form of American) autobiography. It was the narratives of self-styled black revolutionaries in the 1960s and early 1970s that compelled the American academy to reconsider widespread assumptions about literature’s transcendent relationship to social struggle. Since then, the fact that the antebellum slave narrative still receives more critical attention than any other subgenre of American
autobiography points up the persistence of the conviction that black life writing speaks powerfully to America’s need to confront its history if it is ever to change it.

Since Barton’s pioneering book, students and critics of African American autobiography have argued, with increasing emphasis and sophistication in the past twenty years that this genre deserves to be regarded as a phenomenon of literary significance in its own right, in addition to its import as a social document. Described in terms of the three constituent elements of the word autobiography—autos (self), bios (life) and graphe (writing)—the recent history of readerly and scholarly interest in African American autobiography pivots on a shift from a traditional focus on the bios of the author, from whose example valuable insights about history and personal conduct might be gleaned, to investigations of the autos and graphe represented in and by the text. No doubt, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which posed profound questions about the kind of identity African Americans wished to create for themselves in the postcolonial era, spurred the concern with selfhood and modes of identification that reoriented so much African American autobiography criticism in the 1970s. The realization that selfhood is itself constituted by language, along with a post-structuralist wariness of granting any text—especially autobiography— the authority of an unmediated representation of a life or a self, has contributed to the insistence in the 1980s and 1990s on an interrogation of the modes of writing adopted by black autobiographers. To comprehend the rhetorical choices and dilemmas that have faced black autobiographers, scholars and critics have recently begun the most extensive excavation of the history of the genre ever attempted. A notable result of this effort has been the creation of new editions of texts that had been long forgotten or facilely dismissed as inauthentic or sub literary. The recovery and republication of such texts as Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road* enable readers to re-examine what black writers actually wrote in a context informed by the best biographical, historical and critical scholarship that has ever been brought to bear on African American autobiography. It may well be that criticism’s determination to reclaim the words of black autobiographers will lead in turn to enhanced study of their lives, their times, and their sense of themselves.
Along with this wide-ranging intellectual reconnaissance of their field, scholars and critics of African American autobiography have become increasingly engaged in rethinking the methods by which they do criticism. More than a little effort has gone into the task of demonstrating that autobiographies such as the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* are works deserving of a high rank in the canon of American literature. But a countervailing trend in criticism has raised questions about the wisdom of evaluating black American autobiographies according to standard assumptions about how life, self, and writing interact in the tradition of Western autobiography. Much of the criticism of African American autobiography has, thus, been devoted to fashioning new, culturally specific ways of analyzing and judging texts. As a consequence, this criticism has not only reconstructed the viability of the study of black American autobiography as a discipline in and of itself but also has played a leading role in the deconstruction of myths that assume a universal Western standard by which all autobiographies could be measured. The doors opened by scholars and critics of African American autobiography have seen the arrival of students of women’s Native American, Hispanic, and Third World life-writing, each with a significant contribution to the burgeoning field of autobiography studies. Given these developments in African American autobiography study, it seems useful to reflect on Black women’s contribution to the genre. As Joanne M. Broxton (1989) has rightly noted:

“As black American women, we are born into a mystic sisterhood, and we live our lives within a magic circle, a realm of shared language, reference, and allusion within a veil of our blackness and our femaleness. We have been as invisible to the dominant culture as rain, we have been knowers, but we have not been known. This paradox is central to what I suggest we call the Afra-American experience.”

The black woman’s participation in the American autobiographical genre begins with *Belinda, or the Cruelty of Men Whose Faces Were Like the Moon* (1787), a short narrative petitioning the New York legislature for reparations. This “as told to” account reflects an African woman’s shock at being taken while at prayer and sold
into slavery: “Even when she, in a sacred grove, with each hand in that of a tender parent, was paying her devotion to the great Orisha who made all things, an armed band of white men, driving many of her countrymen in chains, rushed into the hallowed shades!” Belinda or the Cruelty . . . records, therefore, not just the physical aspects of the capture in West Africa, and the dreaded “middle passage,” but the complete disruption of the narrator’s emotional and spiritual life and the corresponding loss of her sense of place, both physical and metaphysical. For the black woman in American autobiography, the literary act has been, more often than not, an attempt to regain that sense of place in the New World.

In America, the African woman met the problem of appropriating a new language as her own; she became an American. In the words of Belinda’s narrative, “She learned to catch the ideas, marked by sounds of language, only to know her doom was slavery, from which death alone was to emancipate her”. Belinda or the Cruelty . . . reveals one black woman’s early attempts to own her words, her freedom, and most assuredly, her own image. In order to restore God’s power in her life after she was abducted to America, the African woman had to refashion the language she was forced to learn. In the movement from the spoken word to a written petition for reparations, Belinda or the Cruelty . . . crosses from the private sphere into a public arena to take a political position as spokesperson for millions of transported Africans.

Black women have been carriers of tradition, and values of care, concern, nurturance, protection, and, most important, the survival of the race. W.E.B. Due Bois spoke of the black man as a seventh son of a seventh son, gifted with a veil he could see out of but which others could not see into. For the black woman, there is a veil within a veil, a realm of shared knowledge communicated from generation to generation, both through literature and the oral tradition. Education in black womanhood begins in infancy with lullabies, nursery rhymes, and children’s games. This education intensifies during adolescence when older black women initiate younger ones in their secret recipes, sayings, and the ways and wisdom of holding a man.

Until very recently, women’s autobiography has not been treated with much sophisticated literary analysis. The pace of development of critical literature for autobiography as a genre did not begin to quicken until the 1960s, and there was little
adequate treatment of black literature as a tradition until the 1970s. Two books published in the 1970s helped define black autobiographical tradition and provide some notice of works by women. In 1974, Stephen Butterfield’s *Black Autobiography in America* demonstrated the parallel development of the slave narrative with colonial and early federal autobiographies, journals, and diaries, and noted the probable influence of the founding fathers on the slave narrators’ use of Christian rhetoric. Butterfield also mentioned black women’s autobiography as a

“... high course of literary interest different from one pursued by males, but
ultimately he failed to define the high course of literary interest in any way.”

Also in 1974, Sidonie Smith’s *Where I’m Bound* traced the thematic and structural patterns established in slave narratives, which recur in subsequent autobiographies. Smith recognized the need for a volume of criticism on the autobiography of black women and treated Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as an example of autobiography used as a vehicle for growth into self-conscious black womanhood, yet her focus is on the black version of Benjamin Franklin’s well known formula, a formula that has appealed primarily to men.

By the 1980s, the autobiography of black American women had begun to win the critical attention. The critic James Olney saw this ‘sign of the critical/cultural times’ as paradigmatic of increased interest in the genre as well as the literary enfranchisement of the black woman. Olney (1972) observed:

“If black autobiography is a paradigm, the history of Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a paradigm of a paradigm. Until fairly recently, black writing in general was barely mentioned as literature—if mentioned at all it was usually in some other context—and until very recently, autobiography received the same treatment. Moreover, women writers have not always been given due consideration as makers of literature. But here we
have an autobiography by a black woman, published in the last decade (1970) that already has its own critical literature. Is this to be attributed solely to the undoubted quality of Maya Angelou’s book? Surely not. And here is the most striking sign of the critical/cultural times: her autobiography was Maya Angelou’s first book. . . We can only conclude that something like full literary enfranchisement has been won by black writers, women writers, and autobiography itself.”25

This enfranchisement has been demonstrated by the literary flowering of black women writing autobiography, fiction, and poetry as well as literature and cultural history. Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Paula Giddings, Nikki Giovanni, and Angela Davis have become familiar to both white and black Americans. Therefore the black woman autobiographer (and in this case, the critic) arrives in not only a literary renaissance of the study of autobiography, but a renaissance of black women writing.

1.9 Conclusion
In the beginning of the chapter an effort has been made to state the aims and objectives of the study. The rationale and significance of the study, scope and limitations, methodology and techniques are made clear. An attempt is made to furnish the details of Indian Dalit and African American Autobiography. In fact, this chapter lays the foundation for further inquiry into the sociolinguistic aspects of Indian Dalit and African American writers’ autobiographies.

The next chapter is devoted to the discussion of the nature and scope of Sociolinguistics.
REFERENCES


22. Ibid.

