PREFACE

The present work, “Writing the Self: A Thematic Study of Select Dalit Autobiographies” is an attempt to examine the aspects of marginalization, oppression, discrimination and the Dalit response in the forms of resistance and rebellion. The Dalit narratives are, especially the genre of autobiography, the manifestations of the Dalit response to their exclusion from the mainstream society, the caste-based discrimination and untouchability.

The bases of exclusion of the Dalits from the mainstream society lie in the Hindu/Brahminical ideology. Casteism is a permanently organized force and an institutionalized inequality as Antonio Gramsci and Berreman described oppression in terms of hegemony. According to Althusser, this kind of dominance is an ideology through which the dominant class is able to reproduce its class domination. Brahmins use this ‘ideology of caste’ as a crucial instrument to dehumanise, divide and dominate the Dalits in India.

The dominance of caste-based oppression resulted in resistance and rebellion. Foucault observes that dominance and resistance often go hand in hand. But the agents of history, that include historiography, art and literature, record the mainstream aspects of life. The history of resistance and rebellion of the Dalits did not form part of the historiography, art and literature. The
aesthetic forums, which were the domains of the Brahmins, either silenced or erased the voices of Dalit protest and resistance. Yet there have been attempts to bring the Dalits into the mainstream giving voice to their silenced and erased aspects of life. There have been different stages of Dalit protest.

In the present study, the scholar made an attempt at studying Dalit autobiography and its accomplishment in establishing alternative literature to Hindu dominated literature. Select Dalit Autobiographies are chosen for this study. Sharan Kumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste* (2003), Narendra Jadav’s *Outcaste* (2003), Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life* (2003) and Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) are the works for study and they have been critically viewed in the light of Dalit movements in modern India. The work, being thematic in nature, is divided into six chapters.

Chapter I, entitled “Contextualising Autobiography: Writing for the Community” attempts to examine autobiography and its growth in India. This chapter focuses on the emergence of Dalit literature and the influence of Phule and Ambedkar on the Dalit writers. The focus of the chapter is on how Dalit autobiography has become a successful genre in providing space for Dalits in mainstream literature.
Buddhism was the earliest form of recognizing the Dalit oppression and the need for liberation. Though the resistance to the caste ideology began as soon as the caste came into existence, it is only Buddhism that gave complete confrontation to the Hindu dominance. Gautama Buddha’s compassion for suffering humanity, his historic challenge to the uncivil social order made the untouchables follow Buddhism. Buddhism produced a cultural-ideological synthesis within social reality and encouraged the untouchables to think independently.

Next to Buddha, saint poets attempted at reforming the caste based system and untouchability. The saint poets are called Bhakthi movement poets. Bhakthi poets like Kabir, Ravidas, Dadu Dayal and Guru Nanak represented a cultural revolt. Spiritual equality, social justice and deep sympathy for the common people are major principles of the Bhakti movement. They also stressed that God is the ultimate symbol of universal love, compassion and justice. They wished that God should stand on the side of the oppressed, the weak, and the defenseless.

Then began the first radical Dalit protest movement led by Jotirao Phule (1827-1890), who fought for the freedom of India’s long-suppressed humanity. He struggled to rebuild the society on the matrix of ‘equality,’ ‘justice’ and ‘reason’. Phule drew a clear line between the relation of knowledge and power. In his battle against
discriminatory Brahmanism, Mahatma Phule was inspired by the egalitarian philosophy of the Buddha and Kabir. Phule believed that education was the source of emancipation and empowerment, and therefore he gave maximum importance to education. Phule’s *Gulamgiri* (1873) was a revolutionary deconstruction of the Brahminical culture.

After Phule’s successful contribution in eradicating the sufferings of the untouchables, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s role is indomitable and unquestionable. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar stood for freedom of the Dalits. He burnt a copy of *Manusmriti* at Mahad and rejected the rules of inequality. He believed in studying ‘from below’ and thoroughly identified the objectives of Brahminical sacred books. He pointed out that the Hindu sacred books gave higher priority to graded inequality between different classes. They are written to complete disarmament of the shudras and the untouchables. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar considered the Buddhist recognition of dignity and equality of human beings and converted himself into a Buddhist. Dr. Ambedkar recognized in Buddhism an antithesis to discriminatory Brahmanism.

Before the rise of Ambedkar movement in India, there were social mobilizations in the name of ‘Adi-movements.’ They are basically Non-Brahman in Maharashtra and Tamilnadu, Ad-Dharm movement in Panjab, Adi-Hindu movement Utter Pradesh and
Hyderabad, Adi-Dravida, Adi-Andhra and Adi-Karnataka movements in South India succeeded in mobilizing the masses. To break the Dalit Adi-movements, Hegdewar founded the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) in 1920 and Savarkar constructed the Hindu Mahasabha. Both RSS and Hindu Mahasabha led to the downfall of the Adi-movements. Gandhi’s slogan ‘Rama Rajyam’ and Nehruvian ‘Secularism’ had also caused great destruction to Adi-movements. The fragmented Adi-movements came on to the common platform under the successful leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

Under the influence of Congress and after the death of Ambedkar, Dalit movement split into groups and some of its leaders supported Congress and the rest of them remained in the Republican Party founded by Ambedkar. By 1960s, some Dalit educated youth who had been strongly influenced by Dr. Ambedkar came forward to build an organization, with an aim of fighting against social problems and the caste system. They named it ‘Dalit Panthers Movement’ and it was initiated on 9 July 1972. The Dalit Panthers led a huge movement to rename Maratwada University after Ambedkar. Dalit Panthers were highly inspired by America’s Black Panthers and remained a revolutionary and militant organization of Indian Dalits.

Under the influence of Dr. Ambedkar and in the light of Dalit Panther’s movement in Maharastra, Dalit writers initiated the issue
of self-respect in their writings. Dalit literature played an important role in establishing social consciousness among its masses. Gradually the awareness spread across India, almost in every region, Dalit writers through their poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies started questioning the caste hierarchy and political supremacy. Implicitly and explicitly, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s influence on the emerging Dalit writers is very keen and particular. Now Dalit writers aimed at breaking the ‘culture of silence’ imposed on them. They started telling their stories in their own language and idiom. Now Dalit is an alternative and collective word for ‘Shudras’ or ‘Untouchables’ or ‘Harijans’ and a symbol of environment for change, confrontation or revolution.

Dalit literature, in all its forms and genres, presents the culture of Dalits. Dalit writers, by using their own languages and idiom, are against the dominance of Sanskrit. Among all the forms, ‘Dalit Autobiography’ became a successful genre in depicting the originality of Dalit life style. It transforms the experience of pain into the narrative of resistance and also the means of political assertion.

Chapter II, entitled “Denial of Education: Subverting the Monopoly” deals with the exclusion of Dalits from the domain of education. The chapter focuses on how the Dalit children are excluded from schools and colleges, and the sort of discrimination
they were subjected to while pursuing education. It also focuses on how the Brahminical pedagogy made Dalit students alienated in the schools. The pedagogical aspects, which take into account the upper caste children, need to be critiqued. Exclusivist pedagogy, argued in the chapter, needs to consider the culture, language and ethos of the Dalits towards an inclusive pedagogy.

Chapter III, entitled “Experiencing Discrimination: Dalit Livid Lives” is devoted to the aspects of insults, discrimination and exclusion of the Dalits experienced in the social and religious life, public places and political space as narrated in the select Dalit autobiographies. Dalits are insulted and subjected to accept the feeling of otherness.

Chapter IV, entitled “Writing Dalit Gender: Dalit among Dalits” examines the aspect of discrimination of Dalit women in the caste system and patriarchal order. Dalit girls, for example are exploited both by upper caste and their own caste boys. Dalit women are considered inferior to their men. Their aspirations are not recognized. Being labeled as weak and psychologically immature, Dalit women are confined to domestic activities and never allowed into the public sphere. This chapter explores how Dalit women, under the influence of Ambedkar movement, identified themselves as a strong social force and able to break the oppressive social laws.
In chapter V, “Construction of Dalit Identity: Assertion of the Self” the aspects of Dalits as a deconstructive force to de-Brahmanise the Indian history and to reconstruct the Dalit forms is addressed. Dalit narratives mediated between Dalit writers and Dalits to form into a strong group of social protest against violence. The questions of identity and self-respect made Dalits interrogate the established conventional social structures. Dalit writings in the name of self-respect attracted wide critical acclaim of readers from all over the world.

The Concluding chapter presents the findings of the study. Autobiography is considered the most suitable form of personal narratives combining the personal and the public. It is argued in the chapter that the personal narratives, presented in the autobiographies, also serve as the social narratives of the Dalits. By means of the personal narratives, the writers offer political contestation of the oppressive social order.

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