CHAPTER 2

DALIT SAHITYA: A RENAISSANCE OF WOMEN’S WRITING

One of the earliest instances of women writing and discovering an agency for themselves in literature can be traced down the pages of history to a courtesan named Muddupalani46 attached to the retinue of Pratapasimha – a Nayaka king of Tanjavur (Tanjore) in Tamil Nadu. Her poem Radhika Santwanam can be said to be the earliest precursor of what we now know as ‘subversive literature’47, ‘jouissance literature’48, or ‘écriture feminine’49 of the later day French feminists. Though she was looked upon with respect in the Tanjavur court along with other courtesans; (these women were the only ones

46 Muddupalani (ca 1750) was a Telegu speaking poet and devdasi attached to the court of Pratap Singh (Pratapasimha), the Maratha king of Tanjore. She was born into a devdasi family; her mother and grandmother were both devdasis. Well versed in both Telegu and Sanskrit literature, her best-known work is Radhika Santwanam (Appeasing Radha) Radhika Santwanam is an erotic narrative poem that deals with the marital relationship of Lord Krishna, his beloved Radha and his young wife, Ila. According to Muddupalani, she received the concept of this poem when the Lord Krishna himself visited her in a dream and suggested that she write about the subject. On account of its sexual frankness and its female characters taking the leading initiatives in sex, the poem triggered off a huge censorship controversy in the early 20th century.

47 Subversion is a systematic attempt to overthrow or undermine a Government or political system by persons working secretly from within. This definition calls attention to the most significant characteristic of subversive literature. Subversive literature is generally used to rebel against someone or something, such as the Government, persons in authority or parental figures in children’s literature. Since this kind of literature is often used to go against the opinions and rules of those people who are in a position of authority, the literature is often controversial. An author of subversive literature strives to get people talking about the piece he has written by moving away from common and traditional ways of thinking.

48 Jouissance denotes ‘bliss’ and carries with it the connotation of ‘ecstasy’ and ‘sexual delight’. Roland Barthes, a French literary theorist, philosopher, linguist, critic and semiotician has elaborated on the concept of ‘plaisir’ (pleasure) and ‘jouissance’. Plaisir in a text comes through the more or less straightforward process of reading; while jouissance, a heightened form of pleasure, derives from a sense of interruption, gap, break down where perhaps something unexpected occurs. It is a text that discomforts and unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories and brings to a crisis his relation with language.

49 Ecriture feminine, literally meaning women’s writing deals with the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text. A strain of literary theory that originated in France in the early 1970’s, it was propounded by theorists like Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Monique Witttig, Julia Kristeva among others.
who had access to scholarship, owned property and mastered the arts of dancing, music and literature), with the passage of time, and the arrival of the British their status degraded. In 1910, when Bangalore Nagarathnamma reprinted the classic poem, she expressed her keen desire to read the poem all over again as it was one written “by a woman… who was born into our community, I felt it necessary to publish it in its proper form.” Classical aesthetic theory says that in a well-formed work of art, all the nine rasas or basic emotions such as joy, anger or sexual pleasure, are evoked in fit measure to the subject at hand. In Nagaratnamma’s judgement, this poem had already achieved that rare balance: it was filled to the brim, but not spilling over. However, Muddupalani’s poem had already aroused some controversy: and after its reprint, it created a storm of protest. Kandukuri Veereshalingam, leader of the social reform movement in Andhra Pradesh and a distinguished novelist himself, denounced her work proclaiming,

“this Muddupalani is an adultress, she is born into a community of prostitutes and does not have the modesty natural to women, any parts of the book are such that they should never be heard by a woman, let alone emerge from a woman’s mouth. Using sringara rasa as an excuse, she shamelessly fills her poems with crude descriptions of sex.”

Nagaratnamma’s retort was equally sharp: she questioned whether modesty is natural only to women. Can a poet be denounced just because she is a prostitute? Several great men have written even more crudely about sex!

Two things are of great importance in this entire episode: One, Muddupalani was a low-caste prostitute (akin to the Dalit women in Kolhapur today who are prostitutes as devadasis and Tamasha dancers) writing about women and their feelings towards sex. This was considered to be unacceptable, so much so, that the British Government decided to ban all the copies of the book. Indian literature, they were convinced, contained neither the literary, nor the scientific information required for the moral or mental cultivation so

50 Born in a devadasi family of Bangalore in the year 1878, Nagarathnamma was an Indian Carnatic singer and cultural activist.

essential, if good government was to be desired and appreciated. Only suitably selected and carefully taught English literary works, thought of as embodying a ‘secular Christianity’, could be entrusted with the fine-grained transformations of thought, emotion and ethical sensibility necessary if the moral and political authority of the British was to be recognized.\(^{52}\)

Two, in *Radhika Santwanam*, the narrative has a woman’s pleasure as its central focus – the woman’s sensuality is central. She takes the initiative, and it is her satisfaction or pleasure that provides the poetic resolution. In Tharu and Lalitha’s words, with warmth unmatched in later poetry, Muddupalani celebrates a young girl’s coming of age and describes her first experience of sex. Women taking the initiative in a sexual act was unheard of in literatures of that period. Most importantly, Tharu and Lalitha claim that what must have drawn Nagarathnamma to Muddupalani’s work and what strikes us today is her remarkable subversion of the received form. In traditional literature, Krishna, the man and his sexual pleasure and fantasies are the prime subject; conversely, here, the focus is on his aunt and beloved Radha and his young bride, Ila Devi. What makes the work so radical today, if not in its own time, is the easy confidence with which it contests the asymmetries of sexual satisfaction commonly accepted even today, and asserts women’s claim to pleasure.\(^{53}\)

Therefore, in Nagarathnamma’s efforts to reprint Muddupalani’s poem, we encounter not only an episode in the unwritten history of feminist criticism in India but also the hitherto invisible questions of the woman reader and her requirements for the literary text.

Feminist critics point out that the ideal reader is white, upper-class and clearly male - here, the writing of prostitutes, courtesans, low-caste and Dalit women about the sexual lives of women and their sexual emotions are clearly a sign of a rebellion – a sign that the time has come to change the erstwhile pre-conceived notions about literature. Literature can no longer be suppressed… nor can women be stopped from wielding the pen and claiming a sort of agency for themselves. The time has come for ‘*subversive literature*, ‘*literature of resistance*’\(^{54}\), I discuss this below in an attempt to rediscover Dalit women’s agency in literature.

\(^{52}\) Ibid, p. 9

\(^{53}\) Ibid, p. 7
Vidyut Bhagwat\textsuperscript{54} mentions that the record of Marathi women thinkers gives us an idea of the rich heritage of \textit{women’s protest literature} which we have hardly begun to tap for our purposes. Even the treasure of women’s writing of our own century is so rich as to justify a long-term programme of collective research. We will limit ourselves to Dalit women’s writing in the second chapter; specifically the role played by Dalit literature in enabling women rediscover themselves: rediscover a sort of agency among themselves. Armed with the pen as a weapon, these so-long illiterate women have taken to writing about their lives – a vast body of Dalit literature has contributions from Dalit women writers from all over India – most notably west and south India. Rather, women’s writing has, in the words of Meera Kosambi\textsuperscript{55} allowed us to sometimes peep into, and sometimes explore the lives of women; the world inhabited by them has begun to come alive for the outside world. But before that, we will take a quick look at what Dalit writing/Dalit literature is all about.

\textbf{DALIT LITERATURE :- AN OVERVIEW}

Eleanor Zelliot\textsuperscript{56} says that the Dalit Sahitya (literature) movement in Maharashtra seems to be unique – not in the phenomenon of former untouchables writing literature, but in the quantity of writing, its variety, and its aesthetic considerations. According to her, without Babasaheb Ambedkar and his Mahar movement, the renaissance of creativity that begun in literature of the Dalits could never see the light of day. The Mahars\textsuperscript{57} were one of the lowest of the Dalit castes; the British called them ‘inferior village servants’.

\textsuperscript{54} Vidyut Bhagwat (Apr 29, 1995), \textit{Marathi Literature as a source for Contemporary Feminism} in Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 30, No.17

\textsuperscript{55} Meera Kosambi (2007) \textit{Crossing Thresholds : Feminist Essays in Social History} New Delhi: Permanent Black, p. xi

\textsuperscript{56} Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot (1992) (ed) \textit{An Anthology of Dalit Literature} New Delhi : Gyan Publishing House, p. 1

\textsuperscript{57} Every village had a Maharwaada i.e a separate settlement area for the Mahars. Though they were all-purpose servants, they were assigned various important duties such as serving the village as watchmen, removing dead cattle and carrying the task of messengers.
My quest for protest literature among the low caste Dalits (Mahar caste) brought me to Chokhamela, a Bhakti poet saint born in the 14th century. Though most of his songs are in praise of the God Vitthal, some of them are clear protests of the practice of untouchability.

If you had to give me this birth,
Why give me birth at all?
You cast me away to be born; you were cruel.
O God, my caste is low: how can I serve You?
The cause of pollution is in the creation of the body.
Who is pure?

The next Mahar voice that I came across was that of Gopal Baba Walangkar who challenged caste Hindus about their treatment of untouchables, in his newspaper. Around 1890, the British Government had stopped the recruitment of untouchables into the army. Walangkar petitioned the British Government to allow the recruitment once again. Zelliot mentions that a copy of his handwritten petition, dated 1894, lies in the Khairmode collection of Ambedkar materials in the Bombay University library. The petition that he drew up around 1890 for readmission of untouchables into the army was in the name of the Anarya Doshparikarakham at Dapoli (the Non-Aryan group for the removal of wrongs). In fact, Zelliot is of the view that Walangkar’s petition is the first documentary evidence of the Mahar movement.

Pandit Kondiram and Kisan Fagoji Bansode were two other voices of protest. Pandit Kondiram’s protest goes as follows:-

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58 The legends about Chokhamela’s birth and death are very interesting. Being Mahars, Chokha’s parents were carrying mangoes to Pandharpur (a pilgrimage centre) on the orders of the village headman, a duty expected of the Mahar village servant who was at the beck and call of the Patil. On their journey, God Vitthal or Vithoba, disguised as a Brahman, begged for a fruit from Chokha’s mother. On tasting it, when he found that it was sour, he returned it to her. She tucked it into the folds of her sari and delivered the rest to the priests at Pandharpur. On counting, when one mango was discovered to be missing, she pulled out the half-bitten mango, only to discover that it had become a lovely child – Chokhamela. As far as his death is concerned, it is said that he went with other Mahars to repair a wall at a place called Mangalvedhe. As they were working, the wall collapsed on them; they were all buried under the wall. Namdev, another Bhakti saint from the shimpil or tailor community, and Chokha’s most devoted friend went to collect his body. He found nothing but bones and the bones were muttering “Vitthal, Vitthal”; he took them to Pandharpur and buried them near the steps of the temple.

59 Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot op. cit, p. 5

Keep the memory of our age-long suffering in your minds.
When you see a human animal, have a little pride!
Burn the Brahman scriptures and give a true message!
This is the warning of Pandit Kondiram.

In the Vidarbha area, the best known early leader of the Mahars was Kisan Fagu Bansode, who made attempts to claim religious rights for the Mahars. He made pilgrimages to Pandharpur, collected Chokhamela’s abhangas, published his biography and wrote a play on his life. He also established The Sanmarg Bodhak Nirashrit Samaj in 1901 in which he urged “untouchables” to take up learning, fight for civil rights and create a feeling among Hindus that the downtrodden should be given a chance to improve their status. He also left behind a small volume of poetry, of which the following deserves mention,

Look look all people. This is my Hindu nation.
Divided at its root,
Such segregation as here.
Caste at birth. This is my Hindu nation.
High place to the Brahman,
Low to all others.
The seed of this is in religion. This is my Hindu nation.

Before the meteoric rise of Babasaheb Ambedkar, another prominent voice was that of Shivram Janba Kamble. A butler in the Masonic Hall in the Pune Cantonment, Kamble organized several petitions and conferences and temple and hotel entry movements. He also helped to build up several night schools. Shivram Janba Kamble is also said to have received help from the Gaikwad of Baroda in his various efforts at securing rights for the untouchables. The Anarya Doshpariharak Mandali of Gopal Baba Walangkar was succeeded by the Oppressed India Association of Shivram Janba Kamble. Kamble founded this association in the year 1917; he became the unanimous leader of the untouchables in Pune61 and started a Marathi newspaper Somawanshi Mitra, in Pune in 1909 to educate the masses.

61 Spatial importance of Pune in the evolution of Dalit consciousness
He is also credited for beginning the struggle from within the fold of untouchables, to do away with the customs of devadasi and potraj\textsuperscript{62} prevailing among the Mahars and the Mangs (the devadasi system is discussed elaborately in a later chapter). He is also known to have joined Babasaheb Ambedkar in the Parvati temple Satyagraha\textsuperscript{63}, organised in the year 1929.

A distant relative of Gopal Baba Walangkar, Babasaheb Ambedkar’s voice of protest, claiming dignity for the untouchables echoes with powerful resonance even today, way beyond the borders of his country, his caste. For some he became a God, for some a Boddhisattva and for some, the architect of the Constitution of the newly independent country. In terms of literature, Ambedkar’s movement was of immense importance in that it provided opportunities for education to the underprivileged castes, thereby enabling them to raise their voices in protest. Ambedkar himself was very much a literary person; his first newspaper Muknayak (the voice of the dumb) began in 1920 and carried under its title an abhanga by Sant Tukaram (a Bhakti saint) in which the poet sent a reminder to the people that the shy, the dumb and the bashful were never noticed.\textsuperscript{64}

With the achievement of independence, by the year 1950, it was believed by Babasaheb Ambedkar that Hinduism could never ever erase the concepts of ritual pollution and caste hierarchy from the minds of its upper castes. He therefore went back to an idea he had dwelt upon almost a decade earlier – even if it was destined for him to be born a Hindu, he would not die a Hindu – together with an estimated three million Mahars, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in the year 1956. It was not only a rejection of untouchability per se, but an entire belief system was systematically erased which combined the belief in Gods, myths, rebirth, pollution and caste. Buddhism was seen to be a more rational and human religion, which promised equality to its followers.

Even as the Dalits adopted Buddhism, they also gave impetus to a Buddhist counter-culture that had flourished in the Maharashtrian region in the centuries immediately after the

\textsuperscript{62} Priests
\textsuperscript{63} Satyagraha organized by Ambedkar
\textsuperscript{64} Eleanor Zelliot op. cit, p. 11
beginning of this era, in places like Amravati, Ajanta and Ellora, after the primary centres of Buddhism had shifted outside the country – to Sri Lanka, China, Japan and Southeast Asia. In the words of Baburao Bagul\textsuperscript{65}, Dalit writing begins with the Dalit conversion of 1956 (to Buddhism); these events formed the necessary backdrop for Dalit literature.

The era of literature, lasting from the end of the 1960’s to about the middle 1980’s, might be called the golden age of modern Marathi Dalit literature. After Ambedkar’s conversion, the converted Dalits found a way to a new cultural life. It was then felt that a separate conference of Dalit writers was urgently needed. The first conference of Dalit writers was organised at Bombay in the year 1958 by the ‘Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha’\textsuperscript{66}. However several reasons were responsible for the failure of the ‘Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha’ to become a platform for Dalit literature or Dalit writers. One of them was the split in the Republican Party\textsuperscript{67} after the death of Ambedkar. Nevertheless, the year 1967 was an important year for the Dalit Sahitya movement; The ‘Maharashtra Bauddha Sahitya Parishad’ held its conference in Bhusawal in that year on the 30\textsuperscript{th} of April. Dr. M.N. Wankhade, the President of the Conference raised some very pertinent questions; for example, reviewing the ancient epics like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the literature of the saints and modern Marathi literature, he noted that Dalit literature has absolutely no place there. The students and staff of Milind College, Aurangabad, wanted to have their own literary forum; with this aim they established the ‘Milind Sahitya Parishad’. A fund was raised with the students’ help and a new quarterly ‘Asmita’ was launched; which became the so-popular ‘Asmitadarsha’.

As Vinay Dharwadker\textsuperscript{68} reiterates, the newly constituted community, by definition no longer untouchable, set about systematically creating a literature of its own and most of the

\textsuperscript{65} A prominent Dalit fiction writer


\textsuperscript{67} The Republican Party of India (RPI) is a Dalit political party with roots in the Scheduled Castes Federation led by Dr.B.R.Ambedkar.

\textsuperscript{68} Viinay Dharwadker ( Spring 1994) Dalit Poetry in Marathi in World Literature Today, Vol. 68, No. 2, Indian Literatures:In the Fifth Decade of Independence , pp. 320-321
writing came from the new Buddhists and the people associated with Ambedkar’s movement. Zelliot opines that Ambedkar’s educational institutions have little to do with politics; rather they indicate the unique quality of Ambedkar’s leadership. There are now educated untouchables all over India. Only in Maharashtra, do they run a system of colleges. Beginning with the establishment of Siddhartha College of Arts and Sciences in Bombay in 1945, Ambedkar’s People Education Society supervises colleges of law and commerce in Bombay, Milind College in Aurangabad, Dr. Ambedkar College in the Satyagraha town of Mahad, apart from twenty-eight other institutions (and that was before the year 2005). Nagpur Buddhists have established their own Ambedkar College and various such institutes have also sprung up all over Maharashtra. Thus Ambedkar not only talked about the necessity of producing members of the elite, he enabled the production of the elite untouchable, of whom many were committed to the service of their people. Among the budding writers, some of them were teachers at colleges run by the People’s Education Society (of Ambedkar) and other Buddhist groups, such as the Milind College of the Arts in Aurangabad. Asmitadarsha started from this college by Gangadhar Pantawane, in the year 1968, became the primary journal of Dalit writing for a long time to come. Gangadhar Pantawane gave the clearest definition of Dalit in its contemporary usage, in Asmitadarsha,

“To me, Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, Rebirth, Soul, Holy Books teaching separatisnt, fate and Heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution.”

Thus began the wave of Dalit writing which had as its core concern a rejection of the past together with a rejection of the whole traditional logic of pollution through touch and transfer of substances, ritual purification, genealogical transmission, discrimination and exploitation. The entire canon of Hindu literature too is rejected; seeing in classics like the Mahabharata and the Sanskrit Shastras (legal and social codes) the aberrations of thought and
feeling that has made untouchability a horrible reality for those who are burdened with its stigma.69

Sashi Bhushan Upadhyay70 feels that the emerging Dalit intelligentsia was not satisfied with the representation of their group in Indian literature. They believed that, due to their caste and class bias, the savarna writers had misrepresented the Dalits. He continues that the latter wanted to take the reins in their own hands and write about themselves. This literary protest gave rise to Dalit literature – and this brought the Dalits to the forefront as writers and protagonists. Says Raj Kumar71, the pen has by and large, been in the hands of those who wielded power, while those outside the grid of authority and agency have generally been rendered invisible, even unmentionable, in the so-called great literary texts.

Arjun Dangle is of the opinion that this new literature of revolt, Dalit literature, saw itself as an alternative to the established, dead, middle-class and Brahminic Marathi literature – the ‘literature of the three and half percent’ as it was mockingly called, in reference to the proportion of Brahmins among the Marathi speaking population. Its rise provoked a good deal of literary criticism, and comparisons with Black (or African American) literature in the U.S.A and elsewhere.72 Very interestingly, Dangle highlights three notable features of this type of literature, which are as follows:-

i) It was a literature which expressed grinding poverty and often misery

ii) Some themes were common, such as those of the oppressed mother, the toiling father, the vulnerability to violence in the form of rape, casual beatings and more violent atrocities

iii) The forced and humiliating labour represented by caste-based duties, especially in the case of the Mahars, was also a common theme.

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69 Ibid, p. 323


71 Raj Kumar ‘Dalit Literature : A perspective from below’ in Imtiaz Ahmad and Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay op. cit, p. 129

One of the earliest Mahar writers of the Dalit literature cadre was Shankarrao Kharat; his story revolved around his father as a Mahar village servant. *Bara Balutedaar* appeared in 1958, just two years after the conversion to Buddhism took place. In his writing, which is sad, but not bitter, he describes all the servants of the traditional village, including the Mahar. However, his main thrust is the description of the life of the Mahar and other lowly people in the village. Since then, the Mahars have continually produced literature, chiefly poetry and short stories.

Then came Baburao Bagul, whose short stories, based on city life were much more realistic in their descriptions of violence and vulgarity. Bagul’s most noted work *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti* (When I had Concealed my Caste) took the entire Marathi literary world by storm. Folk poetry reached its zenith in the songs of Waman Kardak – whose songs about Ambedkar, the Buddha, and of significant events have attained great popularity among the Neo-Buddhists. Annabhau Sathe (he is dealt with in detail in another chapter) depicts yet another face of Dalit literature. An untouchable of the Mang community, Sathe did not participate in Ambedkar’s movement, nor in the Buddhist conversion.

Zelliot aptly mentions, “In the late 1960’s, the trickle of Dalit writing became a flood” On the 9th of July, 1972, a group of Dalit writers launched an organisation called the Dalit Panthers whose main aim was to unite all sections of the oppressed and to protest against the atrocities on the untouchables and the ineffectiveness of the Republican Party. It was about this time that Dalit poetry and fiction started getting translated and started reaching middle and upper class audiences all over the country. With the Dalit Panthers (started by Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle and J.V.Pawar), Dalit poetry scaled new heights; it became one of the most important strands in recent Marathi literature.

Revolutionary or renegade, man or maverick, poet or panther – each epithet fits that of the most shocking and most innovative of Dalit writers ever, Namdeo Laxman Dhasal.

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73 Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot op. cit, pp. 13-14

74 The Dalit Panthers modeled themselves explicitly on the Black panthers who were in the limelight due to their protests against white domination and racial discrimination in the United States.
In Laurie Hovell’s words,

“To read Namdeo Dhasal’s poetry is to step into the slums and streets of Bombay; it is to enter into a centuries-old history of both poverty and vitality.”

His anger and rebellion had reached a peak in his poems; his poetry cannot be separated from its historical, political, and social context.

Then comes those poets who are not included within the Panthers; chief among them are Daya Pawar, Tryambak Sapkale and Waman Nimbalkar. Pawar’s influential, somewhat fictionalized autobiography, *Balut*, won him acclaim and since then, the writing of autobiographies has become a very important part of Marathi literature. *Surung*, published by Sapkale won the poetry prize in Marathi in the year 1976; whereas Nimbalkar composed a Dalit poetry collection titled *gaokushabaheril kavita* (poetry from the outskirts of the village) which saw the light of day in the year 1973.

There are some other poets who are well established in the academic world – Keshav Meshram and Yeshwant Manohar. Meshram, a Professor of Marathi literature in Bombay has edited the most important collection of Dalit poetry, *Vidrohi Kavita* (poetry in opposition). Another writer Yeshwant Manohar became the head of the premier Marathi Literature Council in Bombay after completing his Ph.D in Marathi literature. Narayan Surve, an orphan in Bombay, casteless, homeless and penniless, also made a name for himself in the world of poetry.

Whatever be the case, Dalit literature is surely making a place for itself in the elite, literary world; it is a weapon by which the hitherto marginalized, illiterate are making their voices heard. In short, they are discovering a sense of agency through their writings and coming out blatantly.

Some people say that Dalit literature is a sort of a rebellion against Marathi literature.

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However, Dangle\textsuperscript{76} feels that it is not correct; this is because the apparent desire of Dalit writers of cutting the umbilical cord from traditional Marathi literature may seem to some as a separatist step, but Dalit writers are not separatist. It is Marathi literature that is separatist. Marathi literature has never given people from the lowest stratum of society their proper due. This has been one of the reasons behind the birth of Dalit literature. Raj Kumar\textsuperscript{77} too feels that the Dalit writers are not against any group but against the establishment, the government and the social system, which keep them depressed and depraved. These writers aim at creating a literature that tries to create a counter-culture and a separate identity for the Dalits in the society. Thus, the search for identity is a basic dynamism of Dalit culture. Kumar continues to assert that Dalit literature is engaged in carrying out two main functions – ‘demolition and reconstruction’. On the one hand, it is keen to destroy what is considered as ‘deadwood’, the decaying components of the existing social and cultural order; on the other hand, it is anxious to transform the social reality in the direction of total freedom, equality and human dignity.

Dalit literature is somewhat new on the Marathi literary scene, the collective mind of the people reflected in it represents the life of millions of Indians. This life has not suddenly come upon them; it has been imposed upon them for thousands of years; there is a touch of hypocrisy in saying “\textit{this is something new to us}”. In any case, Dalit literature has been described as ‘brutal, coarse and is supposed to emerge from the crude language of the slums’ – it is characterised by a ‘jaggedness of word, granulated structure, rough hewn expression and a scarcely muted anger’ - an anger which may spit fire like wrath, burn lambently like satire, scorch like cynicism, kindle like anguish and enflame like tragedy.\textsuperscript{78}

Raj Kumar\textsuperscript{79} similarly notes that a good number of Dalit women writers are writing about their personal experiences, mostly critiquing the patriarchal social order that exists within their communities and outside. He further points to the paradigmatic shift that is already visible with many Dalit writers raising their voices against different forms of oppression related to class, gender, ethnicity, language, religion other than caste. Women

\textsuperscript{76} Arjun Dangle op. cit, p.1

\textsuperscript{77} Raj Kumar ‘Dalit Literature : A perspective from below’ \textit{”} in Imtiaz Ahmad and Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay op. cit, p. 137

\textsuperscript{78} Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay “Introduction” in Imtiaz Ahmad and Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay op. cit, p. 134

\textsuperscript{79} Raj Kumar ‘Dalit Literature : A perspective from below’ \textit{”} in Imtiaz Ahmad and Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay op. cit, p. 139
who have been oppressed twice, thrice over, because of being Dalit, because of being women have taken up the pen as a mighty sword in order to express themselves – in a bid to make their voices heard. They have powerfully challenged both the public and the private sphere through their writings. In Dangle’s 80 words, Dalit writers are doing the difficult work of portraying this life, through personal experience and empathy, absorbing it from all sides in their sensibility. This is particularly true for Dalit women writers. Zelliot 81 mentions in her introduction to the second edition of her book, From Untouchable to Dalit – Essays on the Ambedkar movement ‘the literature on Dalit women is growing but does not reveal all the stages of their life or their progress.’

**DALIT WOMEN IN LITERATURE**

Vidyut Bhagwat 82 is of the opinion that a striking aspect of post-1967 women’s literature in Maharashtra is the emergence of Dalit women writers. With the spread of education among the neo-Buddhist women in Maharashtra, Dalit women writers like Baby Kamble, Mallika Dhasal 83, Jyoti Langewar emerged on the scene. They have slowly begun to articulate not only women’s agonies in general, but also the experiences and agonies specific to their caste.

Over time, Dalit women of Maharashtra have tried to demand recognition for themselves, not only in the public sphere, but in the private sphere too. They have tried to find a language in which to express themselves – and they have made their inroads into what has acquired renown all over the world as Marathi Dalit Literature. Padma Velaskar 84 mentions that

“Literary and non-literary works of Dalit women speaking from direct experience – Baby Kamble, Mukta Sarvagod, Shantabai Kamble,

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80 Arjun Dangle op. cit, p.310
81 Eleanor Zelliot op. cit, p. ix
83 Mallika Dhasal is the wife of Namdev Dhasal, a leading figure in the Dalit movement.
84 Padma Velaskar “At the Intersection of Caste, Class and Patriarchy: Exploring Dalit Women’s Oppression” in Imtiaz Ahmad and Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay op. cit, p. 33
Kumud Pawde’, Hira Bansode, Urmila Pawar, to name a few from Maharashtra gave me the first sense of the deep complexity of the problem at hand. It was their insights of lived experiences which inspired me to begin this search.”

Here, the literary form that will be used to analyse the Dalit woman’s voice – is the medium of **autobiographical writing**. But before that, let me highlight some of the precursors of women’s protest writing in Maharashtra – names which no Marathi woman will dare to overlook – **Janabai, Bahinabai, Savitribai, Muktabai, Tarabai and Pandit Ramabai**.

**JANABAI** (ca. 1298-1350) was one of the best known and best loved of Maharashtra’s Varkari saint-poets. The hardships of being a woman and the burden of domestic labour are ever present in her writing. The result of her work, according to Tharu and Lalitha are an incipient feminism that is also truly Varkari in spirit and in act. Her sensitive poetry, which is popular even today, illuminates the everyday life of ordinary women and addresses its joys and its strains. The poem that we are concerned with here is a radical one; in which Janabai speaks of herself as a wandering singer – these women were and are still today, considered to be of easy virtue; but Janabai portrays them as free and rebellious, not restricted by the rules of decorum (such as that of keeping the breasts covered with the *pallav* of the sari), which ‘virtuous’ family women are bound by. At another glance, this poem, written so long ago, is also suggestive of that fact that she might be speaking not only of selling her body (as a prostitute) but also of setting up trade as an independent artist;

*CAST OFF ALL SHAME*

*Cast off all shame,*
*And sell yourself*
*In the marketplace;*

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85 Varkari is an influential Bhakti sect that gained huge popularity in Maharashtra around the thirteenth century CE
The Making Of The Dalit Woman’s Agenda: A Study Of Their Organisations And Culture In Kolhapur District, Maharashtra

*Then alone
Can you hope
To reach the Lord.*
*Cymbals in hand,
A veena upon my shoulder,
I go about;
Who dares to stop me?*
*The pallav of my sari
Falls away (a scandal!);*
*Yet will I enter
The crowded marketplace
Without a thought.*
*Jani says, My Lord,
I have become a slut
To reach Your home.*

BAHINABAI (1628-1700) spent her childhood in the village of Devghar, in Northern Maharashtra. Married at the tender age of three, unlike many of the women saints of the Bhakti tradition, she did not break free of the constraints of marriage and wander in search of God (imagined as a lover). Bahinabai had visions of the God Vithoba and his low-caste poet devotee Tukaram; this changed the course of her life. Many of her *abhanga*s explore the tensions in her marriage and their resolution. What is worth mentioning is that she nearly always portrayed her husband’s feelings with empathy even when they were hostile or destructive towards her. The following verses are her lament over the fate of being born as a woman; they also reveal her scepticism, her rebelliousness, and her insistent refusal to abandon her aspiration for the truth.

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*87 Ibid, p. 82*
The Vedas cry aloud, the Puranas shout,  
“No good may come to woman.”  

I was born with a woman’s body  
How am I to attain truth?  

“They are foolish, seductive, deceptive-  
Any connection with a woman is disastrous”  

Bahina says, “If a woman’s body is so harmful,  
How in this world will I reach Truth?”  

MUKTABAI (1841) studied at the school in Pune founded by Savitribai and Jyotiba Phule. Her scathing critique of the Brahmins that was originally published in a journal from Ahmednagar called Dnyanodaya, was reprinted in the year 1942. Named “Mang Maharachya Dukhavisayi”, (About the Griefs of Mangs and Mahars), it is probably the earliest surviving piece of writing by a Mang woman, an ‘untouchable’.

Excerpts from it are as follows:-

“Let that religion (here, she is referring to Hinduism), where only one person is privileged and the rest are deprived perish from the earth and let it never enter our minds to be proud of such a religion... These people (the Brahmans) drove us, the poor Mangs and Mahars, away from our own lands, which they occupied to build large mansions... When our women give birth to babies, they do not have even a roof over their houses. How they suffer in the rain and the cold! Try to think of it from your own experience. Suppose the women suffered from some perpetual disease, from where could they have found money for the doctor or medicines? Was there ever any doctor among you who was human enough to treat people free of charge?”

Thus, Muktabai raises questions that are pertinent even to this day.

TARABAI (ca. 1850-1910) has the distinction of being the first Indian feminist literary critic. Her “exposure of male stereotypes and images of women,” Vidyut Bhagwat points out, appeared almost a century before Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex. Besides,
Tarabai’s forthright polemical style stands in sharp contrast to de Beauvoir’s. Born in a well-to-do Maratha family, Tarabai married very young, had no children and soon lost regard for her husband. The critic Maya Pan dit describes her writing as ‘racy and absolutely full of fire’. Her work “Stri Purush Tulana” (A Comparison of Men and Women) is probably the first full-fledged and extant feminist argument after the poetry of the Bhakti period, says Tharu and Lalitha. Some parts of this huge essay are as follows :-

“Let me ask you something, Gods! ... why did you grant happiness only to men and brand women with nothing but agony? Your will was done! But the poor women have had to suffer for it down the ages...Granted, women are as stupid as buffaloes in the cow pen! They are ignorant and do not know how to read or to write. But does that mean God did not grant them even an iota of intelligence?... A tulsi necklace around the neck, God’s name on your lips... with this paraphernalia you roam around in the guise of a Haridas, but what are you really? Nothing but beggars! Respectable-looking beggars! ... You are far too clever for women. You are, in fact, nothing but scoundrels of the first order! You are so cunning that you will pass through a sugarcane field without letting those sharp leaves touch you, let alone scratch you... You are nothing but learned asses! Yes, that’s what you are really. It is said that it’s always dark just under a lamp! You are no exception to that rule! If only you realized how much evil you contain, it would break your heart!... 

Apart from these women in the colonial era, two other leading women writers were Jyotiba Phule’s wife Savitribai Phule and the legendary Pandita Ramabai. There is no dearth of evidence about these women who laid the foundation for a movement for women’s liberation in India.

It took a comparatively longer time for Dalit women to put pen to paper; their large-scale illiteracy being the chief reason. However, we do get outstanding evidences of Dalit women writing, but of course during and after the British period. Southern India is no less

90 Ibid, p. 223
91 Ibid, p. 222
92 Ibid, pp. 223-235
when it comes to Dalit women and their literary contributions. Our examination of five autobiographies from Dalit women of southern and western India proves this point.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHIES**

Arjun Dangle\(^93\) mentions that an autobiography by a Dalit writer became famous for several reasons:

- firstly, an autobiography was not restricted to the life of a Dalit writer;
- secondly, it was a delineation of the social system, communalism, injustice, exploitation and of the lives of people who had been subjected to these evils.
- Written without glossing over any facts, these autobiographies not only enriched Marathi literature, but also exposed the many facets of the Indian social system and the social and economic injustice nurtured by it.

Smita Patil\(^94\) tells us, an autobiographical writing can engage us with the life stories of Dalit women in an authentic fashion. Lakshmi Holmstrom also endorses autobiographical writing as it creates strikingly new literary forms, tells real life stories of risks taken, and of challenge, choice and change. Sharmila Rege\(^95\) tried to analyse the purpose behind the reading and teaching of these Dalit autobiographies that radicalise the perception of readers. Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Rege continues, thinks that autobiographies are not ‘sob stories’, but stories of anger against injustice. However Anand Teltumbde finds the autobiographical narratives too individualistic, often glorifying the author, romanticizing Dalit backgrounds and failing to represent collective pain. Gopal Guru, on the contrary, underlines the sociologically illuminating, politically subversive and aesthetically interesting character of Dalit autobiography.

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\(^93\) Arjun Dangle op. cit, p.xlii

\(^94\) Smita Patil, “Transcending Orbits of Dalit Women’s Minor Literature”, in Imtiaz Ahmad and Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay op. cit, p. 142

\(^95\) Sharmila Rege, op. cit, p.9
In fact, autobiographies also challenge the academic enclosures of dominant feminist scholarship, according to Smita Patil. This is because Dalit women have to undergo both caste based and patriarchal oppression and therefore, both materially and non-materially, they are more oppressed as compared to upper caste women. This makes it all the more necessary for them to develop their intellectual faculties in order to develop a critique of patriarchy.

Sharmila Rege argues that Dalit life narratives are testimonios; acts testifying or bearing witness legally or religiously. In a testimonio, the intention is not one of literariness but of communicating the situation of a group’s oppression, imprisonment and struggle. The narrator claims some agency in the act of narrating and calls upon the readers to respond actively in judging the situation. Furthermore, Dalit life narratives are one of the most direct and accessible ways in which the silence and misrepresentation of Dalits has been countered. Dalit life narratives forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the ‘official forgetting’ of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance. Also, by bringing into the public domain, details of life, they challenge the communitarian control on self. This dialectics of self and community assumes further significance in Dalit women’s testimonios, for, situated as women in the community, they articulate concerns of gender, challenging the singular communitarian notion of the Dalit community.

Some Dalit scholars, Rege adds on, claim that Dalits writing autobiographies is like ‘digging out stench from hateful waste bins of the past’. Are Dalit life narratives an autobiography (atmacharitra) or a moral source for political movements or reminders of a hateful past? Narendra Jadhav makes a case against these Dalit autobiographies being labelled revivals of memories of a hateful past. He argues that the continued stream of Dalit life narratives over three generations and more suggests that there is no reason for either embarrassment or blame. Rather Baburao Bagul (a leading Dalit intellectual) feels that Dalit literature is not defined by anguish, waiting and sorrow alone, but is a historical necessity in promoting human freedom. M.Kannan and Francoise Gros feel that Dalit writing has tended

96 Smita Patil, op. cit, p. 153
97 Sharmila Rege, op. cit, p.13
to consist of testimonies rather than works of imagination, chronicles rather than artistically conceived texts, lived experiences rather than poetic experimentation, and finally a call for action rather than the conversion of life into art. Tharu and Lalitha claim that autobiographies which appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, heralded the start of a modern genre of creative writing by women. However, the spurt in Dalit women’s writing took place as much in South India as in Western India. Nevertheless, the beginning of self-consciously styled Dalit writing took place mainly in Marathi; in contrast with Marathi, few such autobiographies have appeared in other languages.

There are certain features inherent in the style and way of writing in Dalit women. These features tend to mark Dalit women’s writing as ‘subversive’ as ‘outrageous’ and provokes many people into questioning, whether this indeed is literature. Raj Gauthanam proclaims that Dalit writing is essentially subversive in character, bringing both content and forms which challenge received literary norms. He continues to say that in terms of content, it should set out to outrage, by choosing as subject-matter, the lifestyles of Dalits, who by definition, stand outside caste-proprieties. Moreover, he adds, it is the stated design of Dalit writing to disrupt received modern (upper-caste) language proprieties, and to ‘expose and discredit the existing language, its grammar, its refinements, and its falsifying order as symbols of dominance’ - for it is, according to this, that the language of Dalits is marginalized as a vulgar and obscene language, ‘the language of slums’. Lakshmi Holmstrom states that Dalit writing makes a striking departure from (this) norm, she feels and goes much further in its colloquial approach. It brings into (Tamil) literature subject-matter hitherto considered inappropriate; it uses a language hitherto considered unprintable.

Gauthanam has noted two distinct characteristics of Dalit literature i) Dalit literature has begun to bring about a change; it has begun to awaken the Dalit who lies asleep within the conscience of all people of all castes. ii) It has put forward a new and subversive ethic which not only awakens the conscience of non-Dalits, but which also fills the Dalits themselves with confidence and pride. Last, but not the least, there are no models for Dalit

99 Ibid, p.xii
100 , p.xiii
writing. Sequence, chronology, perception of time, form and language must all be reconstructed in Dalit writing as it evolves. Here, we can mention Bama’s (Bama’s works revolutionised Tamil Dalit literature) writing, which is absolutely novel in that Bama is doing something completely new in using the demotic and the colloquial routinely, as her medium for narration and even argument, not simply for reported speech. She uses the 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."101.

**OVERSTEPPING BOUNDARIES: CROSSING THRESHOLDS**

Among the women whose autobiographies will be analysed, two are from South India102 and three are from Western India, particularly Maharashtra. All five women, namely, Viramma, Bama, Urmila Pawar, Vimal More and Baby Kamble, have daringly crossed the thresholds of their ‘female zones’ to which they were so long imprisoned. Through their writings, all five Dalit writers have discussed intimate details of their lives – theirs are tales of rage and despair, torment and unhappiness; yet they do realize that their writings have an end in themselves – and that is to arouse the consciousness of the illiterate mass of Dalit women in their community. Issues like childbirth and pregnancy, torture at the hands of in-laws, beatings and suspicion by the husband and hunger crises have all been portrayed very graphically indeed. How do they conquer the domains of the public and the private in their ‘wretched’ lives; thereby bringing a meaning to their existences is vividly portrayed.

Our analysis of ‘female zones’ leads us to Meera Kosambi103 who claims that the public sphere is naturally divided into political, socio-cultural and economic domains. The political domain is the domain of political power – the domain of the state and the colonial rulers (before independence). The socio-cultural domain subsumes social customs and

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101 Bama op. cit, p.xix

102 If we fail to look at Dalit women’s literature in South India, our study of Dalit women’s autobiographies will be very incomplete and vastly lacking in variety and depth.

103 Meera Kosambi op. cit, pp. 7-8
institutions involving the family (including marriage), as well as healthcare, education, literature and related matters. The economic domain, in a way, undergirds both these.

1. Viramma –

Says Jean-Luc Racine in discussing Viramma’s text, “It is not, in a primary sense, a text attacking oppression, but it is a narrative which tells how an oppressed woman lives and thinks. Her’s is essentially an example of how oppression is internalised.” Viramma was born in the village of Velpakkam, in Tamil Nadu and married off to a man from Karani called Manikkam. Not only was she a great singer, but a mid-wife, a story teller and a serf of the Grand Reddiar too. Both within the threshold of her house and outside, she carries herself with dignity and retains it till the very end.

Viramma bore twelve children, (though most of them died early), and she functioned as a midwife in her village. Thus, she was sought after by all the women whenever they were in labour or in the process of giving birth. To quote her,

“We midwives help the nurse during labour and we’re paid twenty rupees a month by the state. They even suggested that I come and work at the dispensary permanently, but I didn’t want to. I’ve got enough to do at home and I couldn’t do that work full-time: who’d look after my cows and calves?...The head doctor, the nurse, everybody came to the ceri to tell me to do a course, but I told them no...”

Then she goes on to describe her experience during the birth of a child,

“...I’m given five rupees for each birth nowadays, plus half a rupee which is the cord money. When a woman goes into labour, they come and find me...So I drop everything, I go and see her, I examine her, I turn her round one way then the other, I pester her a bit and then I tell her more or less when the child is going to be born: in two hours or before daybreak or after the first screening at the cinema or after the second. And it turns out as I said it would. I quickly cut the cord with a knife and tell the women attending to go and find a hoe and a crowbar and dig a hole in the drain near the house. I wait for the placenta to come out and go and bury it myself straightaway. Then I take care of the mother...”

104 High caste of landowners of Telegu origin
Viramma was absolutely against the idea of children being born at the hospital; this was because she spoke of the extreme caste discrimination that Dalit women were subjected to whenever they went there. Rather, she was of the opinion that only the difficult cases, where the mother’s and her son’s lives were at risk should go to the hospital. In fact, two of the Dalit women in her community had suffered miserably at the hospital, and she recounts the entire incident, where the new-born babies had been exchanged at birth. In one case, a Dalit woman, Irsamma’s baby boy had been exchanged for a girl. In another case, Kaliyamma’s baby girl too had been exchanged for a boy. Besides, the nurses always used abusive language in speaking to them, insulting them, “...Eh! It felt good back then, eh? Aah well, now’s the time to suffer!”

Discharging her role as a midwife has made her very strong, she comments,

“We see too much suffering with our own eyes! The blood that we see flowing! The blood that we collect in our hands! The pain!...”

What is even more interesting is that as a midwife in the ceri, people who are barren also come to her for vows.

“To be honoured with a child, one needs to make a vow and to make it, a baby modelled in flour is needed. And Viramma is the one in the ceri who makes that baby for women who haven’t got children.”

Viramma also enjoyed the authority of being the serf to the Grand Reddiar or landlord – this put her in a position of authority as far as the other Dalit women in the ceri were concerned. In her words,

“...The Reddiar only touches the seeds (for sowing) after the Brahmin has told him which are the auspicious days...Not just anybody can touch the seeds first. It has to be someone with an auspicious name, who brings luck or has green fingers. At the Reddiar’s, that’s me.” Then again, “At the Reddiar’s, they don’t make flakes on that day out of the seeds they have kept to offer to their God. They have their seed blown. I am the one who does it and it takes so long...”
Not only as a serf, Viramma’s sense of dignity that came from her working for the Grand Reddiar and as a midwife also helped her organise loans for other Dalit women in her ceri, thus,

“...I organised a loan this year for Arayi who wanted to grow a little paddy but didn’t have the money to buy seeds. The nurse at the dispensary was looking for someone growing paddy because she had five hundred rupees to lend. I acted as security because the nurse trusts me - she knows me from the births where I’ve been midwife. After her harvest, Arayi gave her back the five hundred rupees and two sacks of paddy...”

Viramma hires children during the lentil harvest and workers during the peanut harvest too. She asks the women to be honest and not to steal grains, though at the end of the day, she quietly admits that she too does quietly pick up what she has hidden; but even if the Reddiar sees her he pretends not to notice it and doesn’t say anything. In fact, she even admits that when other women would be ordered to return all the grains that they had stolen, she, being their own Paratchi, would never ever be asked that. She would be ordered to search the other women and return the ears of corn before letting them go. She too, feels responsible for the Reddiar and sometimes refuses to steal,

“I can’t go too far in stealing from my master. He trusts us, his own Paratchi, his own Paraiyan...I mustn’t betray that trust and steal four big measures of grain from him...” Then again she mentions several occasions when she is given a decent meal at the Reddiar’s, being the Reddiar’s serf.

Thus, working for the Reddiar has been very important for Viramma – it has provided her life with a new meaning – it has been a huge source of income, prestige and agency for Velpakatta. Financially she claims to be much more stable and even mentions saving some money in the loan fund or the women’s association.

2. Bama-

Bama’s is a classic case of a Dalit lady struggling to make a sense out of her life and work – struggling to rediscover a sense of agency in her life. Without reading Bama, Dalit
women’s literature remains incomplete. Bama is her pro-name; a Tamil Dalit woman from a Roman Catholic family, Bama seeks an identity - but also seeks a change which means an end to that identity. In fact, as Holmstrom says, Bama’s work is not only breaking a mainstream aesthetic, but also proposing a new one which is integral to her politics. What is demanded of the translator and reader is, in Gayatri Spivak’s terms, “a surrender to the special call of the text”. This is certainly not comfortable reading for anyone. Bama is writing in order to change hearts and minds.

Bama’s private life within the confines of the convent was equally stifling. Though she entered the order of the convent and dedicated her life to being a nun with the earnest desire of living only for the poor and the downtrodden, life within the convent was a huge shock to her, because, “even amongst the priests and nuns, it is the upper castes who hold all the high positions, show off their authority, and throw their weight about.”.. Then again, “In a particular class, a Sister told us that in certain orders they would not accept Harijan women as prospective nuns and that there was even a separate order for them somewhere. I was thunderstruck. I despaired at heart, thinking, ‘she tells us this now, at the last moment’.

The school attached to the convent also was not devoid of caste-based discrimination. People belonging to Bama’s community were to look after the sweeping, swabbing, washing and cleaning the lavatories. Hearing all the insults heaped on Dalits, Bama used to sit like a lump of tamarind “dying several deaths within. I would tremble to think how they would react if they realized that I was a Dalit. And being a coward, I survived somehow.”

Then again, about the convent, she states, “before they become nuns, these women take a vow that they will live in poverty. But that is just a sham. The convent does not know the meaning of poverty.”... “My mind was disturbed. My conscience was battered and bruised. At last, I asked myself, is this the life for me? I left the convent and went home, utterly weary and dispirited.”
Thus, in the end, Bama was forced to quit the order and in her writings, we find the pain and anguish of a Dalit woman seeking to establish an agency for herself.

“Today, I am like a mongrel, wandering about without a permanent job, nor a regular means to find clothes, food, and a safe place to live. I share the same difficulties and struggles that all Dalit poor experience. I am like a bird whose wings were broken. After its wings have been broken, it is protected only if it stays within its cage. But if it comes out, it can only flap its wings uselessly unable to fly. And that is the state in which I am now.”

In her outlook on the society in general, she expresses her pain,

“In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste-difference does not disappear... If you are born into a low caste, every moment of your life is a moment of struggle. People screw up their faces and look at us with disgust the moment they know our caste. It is impossible to describe the anguish that look causes... How is it that people consider us too gross even to sit next to when travelling? They look at us with the same look they would cast on someone suffering from a repulsive disease.”

In Karukku, Bama brings about a call to revolt, it is a clarion call to Dalit women to wake up, to fight, to resist, it is a classic case of a Dalit woman using the pen as an instrument in wielding power and authority in a bid to derive agency.

“We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feelings; we must dare to stand up for change. We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission, and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low. Those who have found their happiness by exploiting us are not going to let us go easily. It is we who have to place them where they belong and bring about a changed and just society where all are equal”.

3. Urmila Pawar-

Urmila Pawar was born in the Konkan region of Maharashtra, in a Hindu Mahar family. She belonged to a community that traditionally weaved bamboo baskets. She has a Master of Arts in Marathi literature. She retired as an employee of the Public Works Department of the
State of Maharashtra. Her autobiography *Aaidaan* won the Laxmibai Tilak award for the best published autobiography given by the Maharashtra Sahitya Parishad. Like other members of her community she converted to Buddhism following Babasaheb Ambedkar.

Urmila tai (elder sister) mentions various instances when she was ill-treated in her class, by her teacher, Herlekar Guruji, because of the fact that she belonged to a Dalit caste. She goes on to say,

“I was a frequent target for Herlekar Guruji. He always made me do the dirty work, like cleaning the board, the class, collecting the dirt and disposing it off. Besides, our school verandah was used as a sort of toilet by buffaloes and cows. Students in every class took turns cleaning it. When it was the turn of our class, I alone was forced to clean the entire mess…. One day, Guruji asked me to clean the mess. It was not even the turn of our class…. It was so humiliating that I refused even to budge… Guruji came close and slapped me hard. Then he told me to get out. Howling, I ran home.”

Urmila tai also reminisces of the problem of pollution and untouchability that women from her communities faced whenever they came in contact with the upper class women. The houses of the Marathas and the Brahmins were at some distance from our house, she recalls. Bhandari and Kulwadi (upper caste) women could drink water from their wells but untouchable women were absolutely forbidden to do so. This was a permanent wound in Baba’s (Ambedkar is being referred to) heart. Then again on another occasion she writes,

“I followed Mai to the well. When I reached the well, I saw our women standing with empty pitchers, begging the Maratha women, ‘Sister, please give us some water, please, oh, please’ I retraced my steps with the pitcher empty in my hand.”

Urmila tai commenced her public career as a writer. She says,

“I began to write. I would write anywhere; sitting in the office, travelling in the bus or train, waiting at the bus stop, even standing in a queue. I scribbled furiously.”
Her outlook on the Dalit movement changed with time. Gradually she realised that the people from the Dalit movement treated women in the same discriminatory manner as if they were some inferior species, as they did the ones at home. However, she had to bear the stiff opposition of her husband who always felt that looking after the house was the sole responsibility of a woman. One day, a feminist activist Hira Bansode took her to a women’s organisation in Mumbai. Thereafter, she started attending these meetings regularly to listen to the discussions more carefully. After she obtained a master’s degree, she proudly claims that she was the first in her region to do so while taking care of the house, children and her job. She began to be recognised and felicitated by the larger society, while continuing to suffer humiliation at home. She remembers the cruel words of her husband, Harishchandra, “leave alone, being an ideal wife, you are not even a good one!” – Then it became clear to her that anything that gave her an independent identity, her writing, which was getting published, her education, her participation in public programmes, irritated her husband to no end. She says that the women’s movement had given her great strength to perceive every man and woman as an equal individual. In the movement, while working with the women in the group, she was slowly learning to treat the suffering woman as an equal, a friend and provide her with the support she needed. Gradually her sphere of activities began to widen, she was involved with many organisations, gave speeches, wrote assignments and participated in public programmes like Ambedkar Jayanti and Mahaparinirvan Din (Death anniversary) in the slums. She comments, “My life had taken an inevitable and irreversible turn! But my life partner simply had no idea of what was happening to me.” She grimly states that at all women’s conventions, men are found to occupy all the chairs on the platform. Naturally, women find it very difficult to express themselves freely. Then again, women’s issues did not have any place on the agenda of the Dalit woman’s movement and the women’s movement was indifferent to the issues in the Dalit movement. Even today, she muses, things have not changed.

With time, she helped to float a Dalit Women’s Literary Organisation called the “Dalit Mahila Sahitya Sangathan”. Not that there was no opposition to all this. Her husband used to criticize her, “Such organisations are like soda water bottles. They make a lot of noise when opened, but then they cool off. Mark my words; you will suffer the same
fate!’ Then again, when she used to venture out to collect funds for her organisation, she had to face humiliating comments like, “Instead of going in a group to meet an officer, go separately, alone, and use honeyed words! You will be able to cull out a little more!” Sometimes, she was shocked to hear of instances where women activists used to oppress women in their own homes. In her words,

“A woman activist was speaking like a spitfire on women’s oppression. … later, I came to know that this woman had gagged her daughter-in-law. She had managed to suppress the whole affair because of her position in society.”

Later on in life, Urmila tai went on to publish her works, of which the singularly most important was the book that she wrote with Meenakshi Moon on the women who participated in Babasaheb’s movement.\(^{105}\)

4. Baby Kamble-

‘The suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people. And therefore Jina Amucha was the autobiography of my own community,’

says Baby Kamble in commenting about her autobiography Jina Amucha or ‘The Prisons We Broke’. Her work transcends the boundaries of personal narrative and is at once a sociological treatise, a historical and political record, a feminist critique, a protest against Hinduism and the sordid memoir of a cursed community. Translated from the original Jina Amucha, which was serialised in 1982 and first published in 1986, ‘The Prisons We Broke’ is possibly the first such narrative by a Dalit woman in any Indian language, and most certainly in Marathi.

‘The Prisons We Broke’ is significant because it traces the evolution of the Mahar community from pre-Ambedkar days to its rapid transformation through education and mass conversion. It presents the seeds of a revolution through images of impromptu speeches and

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\(^{105}\) Pawar Urmila and Moon Vasant (2008) We Also Made History New Delhi:Zubaan
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bold entries into temples, of poems in praise of the man who rescued them from the mire of Hinduism. However, Baby Kamble also contributes to the deification of Ambedkar (“…he is our God. Nay, he is even better; he is the god of gods…He is certainly superior to God.”) and is sharply critical of the current generation of educated Dalits that rejects its roots and drives Babasaheb out of its life.

Dearth of food within the Mahar community, recalls Baby tai made her entire community a vulnerable lot – so vulnerable were they that they didn’t stop eating food that was sure to cause epidemics and diseases. It will be interesting to quote from the English translation of Jina Amucha...

“The Mahars considered animal epidemics like diphtheria or dysentery a boon. Every day, at least four or five animals would die. The internal organs of the dead animals would decay in stages. In some animals, organs like the liver, for instance, would be as hard as stones; whereas, in other animals, the organs would be nothing but mush, like overcooked rice. The inside of some animals would be putrid, filled with puss and infested with maggots. There would be a horrid, foul smell! It was worse than hell! But we did not throw away even such animals. We cut off the infected parts full of puss, and convinced ourselves that it was now safe to eat the meat.”

Baby tai speaks very vividly about the torture and pain the women of her community were subjected to during the entire phase of giving birth.

“Our women offer their entire lives to the service of mother earth. But when they themselves become mothers, what do they get? After having given birth to their children, they have to tie up their bellies and lie down helplessly. In those days, there would be no food in the house, not even the water leftover from boiling rice, to satiate the fire of hunger raging inside the belly of the new mother…”

“Actually, the ordeal would begin from the time the labour pains set in. Obviously they (the girls) would be quite underdeveloped at the time of their first pregnancy. The labour pains would continue for quite a long time, sometimes for even three or four days... the ignorant midwives would keep thrusting their hands into the poor girl’s vagina to see how far the baby had progressed. Invariably the vagina would get swollen, obstructing the baby’s path. The girl could overcome all obstacles and have a safe delivery only if her luck held strong! It was a battle with death… The poor girl would keep screaming aloud in
pain… Her teeth would chatter with cold and fear… There would be several wounds and cuts inside, which throbbed with unbearable pain. For want of cotton or cloth pads, blood continued to flow. Why, the girl would be fortunate if her family could find even some dirty rags for her. This was the extent of their poverty!”

Baby tai also recollects caste-based discrimination that she faced in school at the hands of the upper caste girls.

“A majority of girls in our class belonged to the higher castes. For the first time in their lives, they had girls like us – who could pollute them – studying with them. They treated us like lepers, as if our bodies dripped with dirty blood or as if pus oozed out of our rotten flesh. … They would hurl insults at us, ‘That Ambedkar has educated himself, that’s why these dirty Mahars are showing off! That filthy Mahar, Ambedkar, eats dead animals but look at the airs he gives himself!’”

What is most interesting about Baby tai’s public career was that she was a part of Babasaheb’s movement. Baby tai was led into Babasaheb’s movement through her own family. Her brother was actively involved in politics. In their chawdi (slum), Ambedkar’s ideas were constantly discussed and these discussions generated more ideas. One such idea was to celebrate Baba’s birth anniversary on the 14th of April. Baby tai made a firm resolve, at a very young age, to lead her life, according to the path sketched by Babasaheb, the ‘light of her life’. She was very much inspired by Babasaheb’s conversion to Buddhism and from Baba’s life, she learnt the lesson of service to others. Gradually, she too came to realise that her life was meant for the service of the society. She realised that she had to be one with her people. She claims that she was never out of Ambedkar’s movement. She had devoted herself totally to the movement. However, she was a woman who never neglected the home front. In an interview, she says,

“I gave birth to ten children of whom three died during childhood. I never went to a hospital. All my babies were born at home”

Though inspired by the thoughts of Babasaheb, she realised that the hold of patriarchy on her own family, as with all others was very strong. In her opinion,
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“...not sending the women out was considered to be a mark of real manhood. A man who didn’t allow his wife to go out earned respect from the people. ... my father never sent my mother out for work.”

Baby tai too had to conceal her writings from her husband. When asked the reason behind it, she said that

“he was a good man but like all the men of his time and generation, he considered a woman to be an inferior being. He would not have tolerated the idea that I had taken to writing. I used to be scared of him. So, I had to hide my writing.”

There were also instances where like most other women she too, was subjected to constant suspicions by her husband. Today, Baby tai feels that one of the major problems in the Dalit movement and the Dalit women’s movement was that there were so many divisions. She ridicules the Dalit community for forgetting the principles of Buddhism that Dr.Ambedkar gave them and for becoming parasites on the upper caste rituals and faith. Decrying the lack of community spirit among the educated in the community, she underlines the need for a set of intellectuals who will bring in the winds of change and tackle poverty.

5. Vimal Dadasaheb More-

Born in the Dalit ‘gondhali’ caste (a caste of nomadic people) Vimal Dadasaheb More lives in Kolhapur and is a social activist. Vimal tai’s autobiography Teen Dagdachi Chul or ‘Hearth of Three Stones’ bears testimony to the lives of women of the nomadic and de-notified tribes, namely the gondhali and kudmude joshi castes. She dedicates her book to the memory of Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule, without whose pioneering work for women’s education, the path of self-respect would have been an impossible feat to achieve. Apart from writing her autobiography Teen Dagdachi Chul (Hearth of Three Stones), she is also involved in campaigns for the rights of nomadic and denotified communities, Dalit and other

oppressed groups in the region. She is also an active member of the ‘Vidrohi Sanskriti Chalval’, a movement of rebellion against mainstream culture.

Vimal tai recalls an incident when there used to be a continual dearth of food in the household. Then, women used to make bhakris (chapattis) and a thin curry of dried prawns and serve the men and younger children first. Then the leftover bhakri would be shared by the women, giving more to pregnant and lactating women. On one such occasion, Vimal tai asked her mother, that the leftover curry was so watery and wanted to know where the prawns in the curry had disappeared, her mother quietly replied that all the prawns had been served to her father and uncle.

As Dalit women writers, Vimal tai, wrote about the heart-rending tales of women in their community – tales of torture and pain faced whenever they had to move beyond the private confines of the home in an attempt to search for a means of livelihood. She narrates an incident where a young lady of her community had gone to a far-off village to sell pots and pans. Since she had missed the bus, she had got very delayed and returned home late. On her return, she was met with a furious husband who went on abusing her of running away or making merry with someone. After the initial spate of beating and kicking his wife in front of all the men and women, Vimal tai says,

“Suddenly, Ambuakka’s husband got up. He went to the chul (the hearth). There was an iron spatula used to turn the bhakri (chapatti) lying there. Ambuakka was not looking. He thrust the spatula in the chul and heated it up. … he thrust the iron spatula onto her hand with such brutal force that it pierced right through. Blood gushed out of her palm. Akka rolled on the floor in terrible pain, howling loudly.”
Continues to write Vimal tai, “my heart stopped beating with fright. Tears streamed down my cheeks”

Vimal tai belonged to a nomadic community. Under such circumstances, it was very difficult for her to acquire education. Her schooling couldn’t be a regular affair – time and again, she had to leave school to accompany her community from place to place. However, she did keep coming back to her native place, Kolhapur, to carry on with her education. Once, Vimal tai came back to school in Kolhapur after a break of over a month. At school,
all was well until the teacher asked the entire class to recite the alphabet and tables all together. Then each student was asked to do so individually and Vimal tai could not go beyond the first four letters of the alphabet. The teacher was angry and said,

“Go roam from pala to pala for months together… You want to roam from one village to another… eating stale leftovers.” All the children laughed as Vimal tai’s hands were caned and she wept.

Vimal tai remembers her first initiation into the Dalit ‘movement’ – a significant aspect of her public life – it all began on the day she accompanied her husband to a place called Vita for a programme. They were to attend a “Programme of the All Maharashtra Nomadic Tribes”. There Vimal tai came to learn a great many things about the de-notified and nomadic tribes of which they themselves were a part; she came to understand the meaning of the word ‘movement’ and the cause behind it; the significance of the same in their lives and so on. At the programme, an illiterate nomadic woman came up on the stage and spoke out on behalf of the women in her community. This startled her and she too, came to realise that it takes ‘daring to speak like that’. She used to discuss issues related to the movement with Dadasaheb (her husband and an activist of Babasaheb’s movement) and slowly she came to know that self-respect and the movement were more important than living a life working for food and comfort. As she became a part of the meetings, the whole world of social movements began to open up to her. When Dadasaheb began working for the Verala Vikas Project, doing field surveys and writing books, she too joined in at the workshop at the Verala Vikas Project. It was a project that involved the application of new technology in building wooden houses for the de-notified tribes and backward caste communities. Thus, here is a Dalit woman, belonging to one of the lowest castes in the country, joining up in the movement and becoming a part of it.

What makes all these autobiographies so very important is that they are Dalit feminist critiques of patriarchy on the one hand and the struggle of a community of women against caste discrimination on the other hand. There are graphic descriptions of physical and psychological violence on women both in the public and the private spheres. What makes these writings a ‘representation of Dalit women’s reality’ is that they are narratives of
‘gendered beings’ who look at the world initially from their location within the caste, but then they go on to transcend their caste identity from a feminist perspective. These are texts that analyse the position of the Dalit woman today – where the Dalit woman stands today, questioning the established ideologies of caste, modernity and patriarchy.

An analysis of these autobiographies from Southern and Western India reveal some distinguishable traits, some common features that sets this kind of writing apart from autobiographies written by upper-caste women. Some of them are as follows:

1) Firstly, autobiographies by Dalit women are set to flout received notions, established conventions, overstep boundaries, lack any structure or central plot and appear as a series of memorable events in the life of the protagonist; rather, as a book with interconnected anecdotes. Interestingly, each of these writings seem to create a uniquely different Dalit-feminist perspective. As Lakshmi Holmstrom comments, Bama was already formulating a ‘Dalit feminism’ which redefined ‘woman’ from the socio-political perspective of a Dalit; questioning all oppressions, disturbing all complacencies, and reaching out, empowering all those who have suffered different oppressions. It is precisely because it tells the story of Bama’s personal struggle to find her identity that Karukku also argues so powerfully against patriarchy and caste oppression.

2) Secondly, in Dalit women’s autobiographies, everyday happenings are discussed in great detail and particular concern is taken to be meticulous in every detail of quotidian life. For example, trivial occasions like women working together, preparing and eating food, celebrating and singing, bathing and swimming are vividly discussed; so are everyday rites such as a coming-of-age ceremony, a wedding, childbirth, possession by a spirit or even a death or celebration of pongal.

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108 Bama for example, breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout her work, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new and different pattern of reading in Tamil. In fact, she has further stated that the style in which her book Karukku came out was completely spontaneous; it was only after it was written that she chose to leave it as it was, without attempting to ‘correct’ it, realizing that she had found her own voice and style.

109 Pongal is a four-day long harvest festival celebrated in the state of Tamil Nadu.
3) A very important feature of these ‘testimonials’ (to use the term coined by Sharmila Rege) is that they are characterised by a loose and so called ‘lower-class’ language – To quote Viramma

“...Sinamma, how particular our language is and how blunt: the Reddiar is very right when he tells us we speak a half-language. And that half-language betrays us every time we open our mouths, even when we are well-dressed, even in the market when everybody’s mixed together. In the buses, people move away from us when the Conductor says, ‘That has to be the Pariahs!’ We are recognized everywhere, at the temple, in the cinema”... “...I say that you have to control yourself, but we are not restrained and that makes us easily recognisable.”

Most importantly, the language used between the husband and wives were so obscene and vulgar that it was difficult for a reader to digest it. For example, Viramma’s conversation with her husband shows us the baseness of the language. Then again, when it comes to discussions about wearing a blouse, monthly periods, the first night, having children, Dalit women often do not attempt to hide any of the facts – they are quite open even in describing the sexual act. Often, the fights between husbands and wives were another area where language loses all its sense of decency and acted as a weapon in the hands of these powerless women as a last resort to fend for themselves. Here we get a better explanation from Bama,

“If he shows his strength of muscle, she reveals the sharpness of her tongue. Because she can’t hit him back, she curses him roundly. What else can she do”

On a different note, Bama tries to reflect on the nature of the violence meted out on Dalit women by their menfolk,

“...Nowadays, when I reflect on how the men in our streets went about drinking and beating their wives, I wonder whether all that violence was because there was nowhere else for them to exert their male pride or to show off their authority. All that suppressed anger was vented when they came home and beat up their wives to a pulp. Even though they are male, because they are Dalits, they have to be like dogs with their tails rolled up when they are in the fields, and dealing with their
landlords. There is no way they can show their strength in those circumstances. So they show it at home on their wives and children. But then, is it the fate of our women to be tormented both outside their houses and within?”

4) Songs generally referred to as *ovi* in Marathi – are characterised by their conspicuous presence in all of these ‘testi-monios’. Lakshmi Holmstrom in her introduction to Bama’s Karukku states that all Dalit writing reclaims and remains close to an oral tradition made up of work-chants, folk-songs, songs sung at rites of passage, as well as proverbs—and some of this tradition belongs particularly to the women’s domain. As Bama states,

“The women always sang songs and laughed like this, while weeding, transplanting rice, cutting the crops at harvest time, or doing anything else. They always teased each other through their songs...they used to sing lullabies, rorattu songs, to the babies in their cradles. If anyone died, the women sang oppaaris and wept loudly. Thinking about it, from birth to death, there are special songs and dances. And it’s the women who perform them. Rorattu to oppaari, it is the women who sing them...”

In Viramma’s life too, songs played a very important role – when the time came for her marriage to be consummated after her first monthly period she graphically explains that all the intricate details were explained to her in the mannerism of songs. Viramma also goes on to describe the dynamic role played by songs in their woebegone lives - She says that whenever they break into songs at work, neither do they feel tired, nor do they feel the pain in their knees or their hands. And to top it all, she says that the work progresses faster. In fact, Viramma’s acquaintance with her translators Josiane and Jean-Luc was primarily due to the fact that she could sing very well. The men too used the medium of songs to encourage them in their quotidian lives, as for example, songs were often used to co-ordinate the movements of the men who worked on the shaft-well. Apart from that during deaths and births too, songs played a very significant role in the lives of Dalit women. As Lakshmi Holmstrom states the other aspect of this language of women is its vigour and its closeness to proverbs, folksongs and folklore. A special characteristic of this language is its closeness to songs and chants.
5) Most of these ‘testi-monios’ betray the fear of Dalit women being called ‘loose’; thereby testifying to the exploitation caused by upper-caste men which includes rape as well. As Viramma laments,

“We Paratchi have the reputation of being easy women who’ll jump into bed with anyone if they whistle...We work in remote fields, young guys come past...But we’re not whores. Those gentlemen of the ur (area inhabited by the upper-caste people) always talk a lot about the uncleanness of Untouchables, but our holes always turn them on. We’re the ones they get up to all their dirty tricks with…”

This is all the more evident in Bama’s description of an incident where a young Dalit girl was punished for crossing the limits of decency, even when the entire onus was on a man named Manikkam. As the headman of the paraiya community made it very clear,

“... a man may do a hundred things and still get away with it. You girls should consider what you are left with, in your bellies…”

6) Another significant feature of these ‘testimonios’ is that they emanate with a consciousness of the powerful presence of Gods/Goddesses/Spirits/Demons etc. For example, Bama talks of the existence of several pictures and icons of Jesus, Our Lady, St. Joseph, St. Anthony, St. Sebastian, St. Ignatius, Archangel Michael, the Holy Family and the Crucifixion in her household. There are elaborate descriptions of the festivals relating to the Goddesses in her books. The fear of the evil that is known to possess these women (especially during their menstrual periods) are also known to have a great impact on their lives. As Bama says,

“They spoke a lot about peys (ghosts) in our streets... I never heard of upper caste women becoming possessed or dancing in frenzy. The peys always seem set on women from the pallar, paraiyar, chakkiliyar, and koravar communities...all the same I thought about the fact that only women – and Dalit women in particular- become possessed… .I decided then that it is up to us to be aware of our situation and not fool ourselves that we have been possessed by peys. We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. I told myself that we must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged and broken in the belief that this is our fate. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive.”
Dangle\textsuperscript{110} quotes Sartre, “writing is not simply writing; it is an act, and in man’s continual fight against evil, writing must be deliberately used as a weapon”. Dalit women have effectively made use of this weapon to bring about a change, not only in their lives, but also in the lives of others. Rather, anyone who wishes to study Indian women, should listen to their voices, and find alternative conceptions in Indian civilisation, often startlingly different from what one is used to in our classics, should turn to materials like the lives and poems of the women saints, women’s tales, songs, riddles, games and proverbs in oral traditions all over the country and the myths and cults of goddesses.\textsuperscript{111} Marathi women’s literature from the 13\textsuperscript{th} century onwards, Vidyut Bhagwat says gives us a key to the conceptual and practical strategies employed by women to create counter-cultural meanings and spaces. She delves deeper into problematising the issue and asks her readers not to treat women as a monolithic category. This is because their individual voices are concrete and specific reflecting their own personal, caste and class experiences. Moreover, deliberate attempts have to be made to develop new canons of literary and social criticism to ensure that a woman’s voice is listened to as such and not as a reverberation of something else. Thus a sensitive understanding of the visions and utopias entertained by these women can serve as a proper basis for developing a sound historical critique of patriarchy. Finally she says that women’s literature is pregnant with awesome possibilities for the future - a knowledge of the multiple strategies of open and guerrilla defence employed by women over the past seven centuries will help us to draw up a concrete programme of action for today and tomorrow.\textsuperscript{112}

Gopal Guru\textsuperscript{113} in the afterword to Baby Kamble’s “The Prisons We Broke”, says that the life story of Baby Kamble and other Dalit women writers decisively destroy the myth which certifies Dalit patriarchy is democratic. Such narratives of Dalit women’s suffering brings out the worst form of exploitation and physical torture inflicted on the Dalit woman by the Dalit male, by the upper caste male, and by the Dalit female too. Most importantly, a Dalit woman’s life narrative, I feel deconstructs obelisk-like structures of societal power to

\textsuperscript{110} Arjun Dangle op. cit, 324
\textsuperscript{111} Vidyut Bhagwat, op. cit, p. 27
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid, p. 29
\textsuperscript{113} Baby Kamble op. cit, 166
bring winds of change into their lives. As Sharmila Rege\textsuperscript{114} rightly comments, Dalit women are the defining points of a simultaneous recovery of a space for a language of caste and the women’s question on its own terms.

However, our analysis of Dalit women’s literature and their attempts to derive an agency will remain incomplete without reference to the modern-day, post-Ambedkarite Dalit women writers, Hira Bansode, Mina Gajbhiye, Dr. Jyoti Lanjewar and others. Out of them, I will take up few lines from one poem each by Hira Bansode and Dr. Jyoti Lanjewar, and trace the element of defiance within.

\textit{SLAVE}

\begin{verbatim}
Where the doors are decorated with mango leaves
Where the houses are ornamented with little flaming oil lamps
In that country a woman is still a slave
Where Sita entered the fire to prove her fidelity
Where Ahilya was turned to stone because of Indra’s lust
Where Draupadi was fractured to serve five husbands
In that country a woman is still a slave
Where a woman’s identity fades like nature’s blossoms
Where delicate jewels of emotion are trampled under a heel
Where the free birds of dreams are scorned
In that country a woman is still a slave...
To be born a woman is unjust
To be born a woman is unjust
\end{verbatim}

Dr. Jyoti Lanjewar has also written a great deal about caste and its implications on the Dalit women. Her poem “Mother” expresses each and every dimension of the Dalit woman’s life vividly; a study of Marathi Dalit women poets will be incomplete if I overlook this astoundingly sarcastic poem...

\textsuperscript{114} Sharmila Rege op. cit, 58
MOTHER

I have never seen you
Wearing one of those gold-bordered saris
With a gold necklace
With gold bangles
With fancy sandals
Mother! I have seen you
Burning the soles of your feet in the harsh summer sun
Hanging your little ones in a cradle on an acacia tree
Carrying barrels of tar
Working on a road construction crew...
I have seen you
With a basket of earth on your head
Rags bound on your feet
Giving a sweaty kiss to the naked child
Who came tottering over to you,
Working for your daily wage, working, working...
I have seen you
Washing clothes and cleaning pots
In different households
Rejecting the scraps of food offered to you
With pride
Covering yourself with a sari
That had been mended so many time
Saying, “Don’t you have a mother or a sister?”
To anyone who looked at you with lust in his eyes...
I have seen you
At the front of the Long March
The end of your sari tucked tightly at the waist
Shouting “Change the name”,
Taking the blow of the police stick on your upraised hands
Going to jail with head held high...
I have seen you
Saying when your only son
Fell martyr to police bullets
“you died for Bhim, your death means something”
I have seen you

On your death bed...
Saying with your dying breath
“Live in unity... fight for Baba... don’t forget him...”
And with your last breath
“Jai Bhim”
Mother, I have seen you...

The ‘Long March’ refers to the march that took place in the year 1979 after the Government’s decision to rename Marathawada University in honour of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar was reversed. Other scuffles with the police refer to the Marathwada riots and the Worli riots that took place between the Dalits and the State Government. Thus one finds that Dalit women are writing boldly about their lives; about the significant events that affect them; and about their dedication to the Dalit movement started by Ambedkar.

In concluding this chapter, I would like to quote Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine,

“Contrary to popular expectation, the weight of poverty, illiteracy and oppression has not plunged Viramma, or other Dalits into a state of hopelessness... Beyond the social definition of their position, they have something else, which is simply the unflinching, unaltering, and unflagging core of humanity. Whatever have been the tragedies and trials of existence, never has the sap of life dried up under the bark. And here lies in the depth of the minds of these apparently submissive Dalits an extraordinary source of energy waiting to be tapped for emancipation...”

Racine’s quote brings out poignantly the following questions:-

- Where is the Dalit woman today?
- How is Dalit feminism defying the construction of Dalit and woman?
• Are Dalit women the ‘other’ of modern Indian women?
• Is the term ‘Dalit feminism’ radically unstable?

To find out the answers to these questions and beyond, I now turn to the Dalit women of Kolhapur district and examine the three most important issues that are confronting them in the contemporary period:-

• Issues related to their survival and livelihood,
• Issues relate to their dignity and prestige and
• Issues related to the basic requirements of life.