According to *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, “Distress” means “a feeling of great worry or unhappiness” (“distress,” def.1) and “Sufferings” means “feelings of pain and unhappiness” (“sufferings,” def.1). Being on the extreme periphery of the marginalized community, Dalit women’s voices are suppressed. Currently, among the marginalized voices (African-Americans, Australian Aboriginals, Black-Canadians, etc.,) all over the world, the Dalit voice is surfacing prominently. ‘Dalit’ is a Sanskrit word which means “broken, torn, destroyed and crushed” (Malti P. Sharma 46). Dalits, in India, are named differently in different regional languages like Mahar in Marathi (Central India), Mala in Telugu, Paraya or Pariah in Tamil, Dalit or Lal Deghi in Hindi (North India), Chura in Punjabi (North West India), Pulayar in Malayalam (South India) and so on. The British categorized Dalits as “the Depressed Classes” and “the Scheduled Castes” in the Scheduled Caste Act of India, 1935. Mahatma Gandhi named them “Harijans” which means “children of God” (Anand 4). Dr. B. R. Ambedkar called them “broken men” (Ambedkar, *The Untouchables* 116). Dalit is a self-adopted term used by untouchables of Hindu society as this marginalized section of society feels that the terms like “Ati-Shudra”, “Scheduled Castes” or “depressed classes”, etc., are synonymous with “derogation, domination and paternalism” (Raj Kumar, “Dalit Literature” 131).

The Indian Hindu society, Vedic period onwards, is divided into four main castes—the Brahmins (the Priests), the Kshatriyas (the Warriors), the Vaisyas (the Traders) and the Shudras (the Servants). The social order is called *Chaturvarna Vyavastha* in which the castes are called as *Varnas*. This system is a constructed social hierarchy. The Shudras occupy the lowest position in this division. These four castes “eventually developed into a social mosaic of 3000 sub-castes, with the Untouchables at the bottom of the list...actually outside the list” (Anand 4-5). The untouchables are the lowest of low and occupy the position lower than the Shudras and are called as *Avarna* or *Ati-Shudra* or *Asvarna/Asvarna jati*: “Ancient literatures mention Antaja or Antyaja (last born); the term refers to the untouchables who had no place in Varna scheme. Since medieval times a fifth Varna called Panchama, was added to the original four” (M. Chauhan 95). The members of all the four varnas are called *Savarna* or *Savarna jati*. The belief that the *sparsha* (physical contact) of *Asvarna jati* defiles the *Savarna*, led to their being addressed as untouchables. In such contexts caste determined not only the vocation
and status of a person but also his association with the members of other castes which could not be altered by any talent the person possessed or accumulated. In such hierarchical division of the society, Brahmins were assigned the job to cultivate the knowledge, the Kshatriyas to bear the arms and the Vaisyas to trade and the Shudras to serve as *Manusmriti* declares, “Only one work the creator ordained for the Sudras that is to ungrudgingly serve the above three” (qtd. in Louis 41).

The Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Vaisyas are called *Dwiza* (twice born) because these three varnas can perform the ritual *Upanayana* but Shudras cannot, so they are called as *Ekza* (once born). In medieval period, a person who had not performed the *Upanayana* ceremony could not acquire education. This resulted in total exclusion of Dalits who “had no access to public facilities such as wells, rivers, roads, schools and markets, etc.” Untouchability was practiced against them: “Physical contact with the untouchables was said to be ‘polluting’, and worse still, even their shadows were considered ‘defiling’” (Raj Kumar, “Dalit Literature” 130). The untouchable had to “carry, strung from his waist, a broom to sweep away from behind the dust he treaded on lest a Hindu walking on the same should be polluted…the untouchable was required to carry on earthen pot hung in his neck wherever he went, for holding his spit lest his spit falling on earth should pollute a Hindu who might unknowingly happen to tread on it” (Ambedkar, *Annihilation 5*).

However, Dalits, who are deliberately degraded as untouchables, have never accepted their downtrodden position. The very first response to untouchability came in the form of the *Bhakti* Cult which rose against the *Vedantic* philosophy. *Bhakti* or devotion to God was considered as the sole means to achieve salvation. The untouchable saints like Ravidas, Chokhamela, Kanaka, Nandnara and many others were attracted towards the *Bhakti* Cult. In one of his *Abhangas*, Chokhamela prays to God:

O God, my caste is low; how can I serve you?
Everyone tells me to go away; how can I see you?
When I touch anyone, they take offence
Chokhamela wants your mercy. (qtd. in Verma and Kanupriya 64)

However, these efforts were of no success to the untouchables. Oppression from all sides forced them to embrace Islam and Sikhism. Christianity also attracted the untouchables:
The Untouchables resorted to conversions as a means to getting rid of Hinduism, which brought all miseries to them. Moreover, they expected to get a new social status which was an obvious motivational force for conversion to Islam, Christianity or Sikh religion, in addition to certain material benefits. (Kshirsagar 45)

But conversion did not end discrimination due to unacceptability on equal terms in those religions.

The untouchable movement progressively spread in the nineteenth century. The introduction of English education by the British paved the way for the socio-religious reform movements aimed at the improvement of the social condition of Dalits. The modern education exposed the ideas of liberty and equality. The sections of society that had access to English education began to work for the upliftment of the downtrodden.

Mahatma Jyotirao Govindrao Phule (1827-1897) was the first low caste reformist in India. He took the initiative towards the improvement of the condition of Dalits. He wrote *Ghulamgiri* (1873) in Marathi. This work has been translated into English as *Slavery* by P. G. Patil in 1990. In the Preface to *Ghulamgiri*, Phule has written:

> Since the advent of the rule of Brahmins for centuries, the Shudras and Atishudras are suffering hardships and are leading miserable lives. To draw people’s attention to this and that they should think over their misfortune and that they should eventually set themselves free from this tyranny of the Bhats (Brahmins) perpetrated on them- is the main aim of this book. (qtd. in Louis 28)

Mahatma Jyotirao Govindrao Phule’s wife, Savitribai Jyotirao Phule (1831-1897), was also a social reformer. She along with her husband strove for the emancipation of women. Savitri Bai was “the first female teacher of the first women’s school in the country and is also considered as the pioneer of modern Marathi poetry” (“Salute To”). In 1852, she opened a school for untouchable girls. She played pivotal role in improving women’s condition and fighting for their rights during colonial India.

After the First World War, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar entered the national scenario. Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) stressed on the opening of national schools: “…national schools must be the most potent means of educating the ‘untouchables’ and abolishing the curse of untouchability from the schools”
He stated that the removal of untouchability was an amendment the upper caste Hindus must make to Hinduism and to themselves: “As a Hindu I believe in the justice and necessity of removing the evil of untouchability and shall on all possible occasions seek personal contact with and endeavor to render service to the submerged classes” (qtd. in Zelliot 153).

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) considered education as a way to the emancipation of Dalits: “Educate, Agitate, Organise” (Queen 62). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar differed from other Dalit leaders who claimed that untouchables were pre-Aryan, the original settlers of the land. He refused the claim that untouchables were ““Adi-Draavida or Ad-Dharm” (pre-Aryan)” (Zelliot 82) but emphasized that they were of the same racial background as other Indians. He argued that the degraded position of untouchables in Indian society was of social origin and not of racial, and therefore subject to change. During 1970s Dalit movement emerged as a new social movement and expressed itself through radical literature and action:

Dalit literature, today, has emerged as an independent literature with its own theory, aesthetics and philosophy rejecting the oppression, suppression, discrimination and exploitation of the Dalits….Protest is at the base of Dalit literature. Dalit writing deals with oppression and discrimination derived from authentic experience, giving a new direction to the society in this postmodern context. (Venkatratnam 9)

Dalits have remained a neglected lot and among them the Dalit women are “Dalits among Dalits” (Bhoite vii), the most neglected and unrecognized human beings. In this context Dr. B.R. Ambedkar remarked:

…the Hindu caste system as a pyramid of earthen pots set one on top of another. Not only are Brahmans and Ksatriyas at the top and Shudras and untouchables on the bottom, but within each earthen pot, men are at the top and women of that caste are on the bottom like crushed and wasted powder. And at the very bottom are the Dalits and below them are the suppressed Dalit women. (Omvedt 321)

A Dalit woman besides sharing deprivations with Dalit man has to further bear the tortures of the patriarchal social order. Jyoti Lanjewar observes, “Dalit women are also Dalits in relation to Dalit men within the Dalit community. They are thus Dalits twice over insofar as they bear the burden of both gender and caste oppression” (Basu,
“Narratives” 195). All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) observes, “…dalit women’s subjugation is materially embedded, that dalit women are thrice-subjugated as women, as dalit women, and as dalit women who perform stigmatized labour” (A. Rao, Introduction 11). Gopal Guru argues that Dalit women experience: “…two distinct Patriarchal structures/situations: a brahmanical form of patriarchy that deeply stigmatized dalit women because of caste status, as well as the more intimate forms of control by dalit men over the sexual and economic labour of “their” women” (1). Dalit women suffer violence, threats of rape, sexual exploitation, molestation at the hands of Dalit men as well as from the upper caste men. Challapalli Swarooparani’s lines reflect the double subjugated location of Dalit women:

When has my life been truly mine,  
In the home male arrogance  
Sets my cheeks stinging,  
While in the street caste arrogance,  
Splits the other cheek open. (qtd. in Basu, “Narratives” 195)

Dalit women suffer inside the walls of the house as women and also outside the house as Dalit women.

Women’s movement in India spearheaded in 1970s and included different shades of feminist perspectives. In the first phase, the women’s movement laid great emphasis on women’s rights and in the second phase, the stress was on women’s liberation and autonomy. Issues of women’s paid work, their unpaid domestic work and unionization were common issues of all women’s organizations while the autonomous women’s groups focused on the issue of violence within the home and outside in society. However, the specificity of oppression of Dalit women was absent in these forums due to ‘Indian Women’ being treated as a homogenous group: “Caste bondage had gender specificities and specific caste based atrocities against Dalit women were not taken up in these debates. This is mainly because the category of ‘Indian Women’ was treated as a homogenous category and read as ‘middle class’ ‘upper caste women’” (Jogdand xi). Indian feminism in asserting the female identity did not take into consideration the peculiar socio-economic environment which makes Dalit women’s experience different from the upper caste women’s experience. Feminists like Uma Chakravarti, Anita Ghosh,
Sharmila Rege, and Anupama Rao argue that the socio-economic environment makes the experience of a Dalit woman different from the upper caste woman. Maithreyi Krishnaraj in her Foreword to *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* supports the remarks of Uma Chakravarti: “Upper caste women may face gender oppression but they also gain privileges of belonging to a higher caste and will defend those privileges” (xii). In case of Dalit women, their marginalized position denies them justice pushing them further into the cycle of oppression and subjugation.

The condition of the Dalit woman is very much similar to that of the Negro woman in the white male dominated American society: “I discovered that black women had had similar experiences in the US and Africa” (Stephen). Black feminists like Barbara Smith, Deborah Mcdowell, bell hooks, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde and Susan Wills argue that White feminists overlook the Black and Third world women. They cannot represent the experiences of a Black woman as the oppression suffered by a Black woman is different from the experiences of the White women. Audre Lorde in her essay “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” states: “As white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their experience alone, then women of Color become “other,” the outsiders whose experience and tradition is too “alien” to comprehend”(117). Black feminists argue that Black women are oppressed. They suffer not only due to sex related issues but also due to racism. Similarly, Dalit women are marginalized because of gender and caste. Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” asserts, “Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be formed in concrete, historical and political, practice and analysis” (24) as a consequence the Indian feminist movement is critiqued “for not paying attention to the specific and more extreme forms of oppression experienced by dalit women who bore a triple burden: as dalits from the upper castes, as labourers from the landlords, and as women from men of their own families and castes” (Chakravarti 4). Dalit women’s lives and experience are different from the lives and experience of the upper caste women as caste, class, social, political and cultural factors suppress their voices.
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” argues that the very structure of colonialism prevents the speaking of ‘subaltern’. Therefore, for the colonized woman, speaking becomes even more difficult as the double bind of colonialism and patriarchy represses her completely:

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is ‘evidence’. It is, rather, that, both as object of colonist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (82-83)

Thus, Dalit woman is a subaltern among subalterns in context of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s statement. Surendra Jondhale in his article “Theoretical Underpinning of Emancipation of Dalit Women” admits: “Upper caste woman is an adjunct to a man, a dependent and a slave in the household. Dalit woman has additionally to face outside world necessitated by economic deprivation and an urgent need to earn for livelihood. Her subjugation is more acute. Being Dalit she is treated with contempt by upper caste women…” (107). Dalit women face violence not only from Dalit men and upper caste men but also from the upper caste women, who ill-treat Dalit women because of their caste, and thus become complicit in Dalit women’s subjugation.

The body of Dalit woman is taken as “a site for the assertion of caste based pride and domination” (Karan Singh 50). Anupama Rao in her Introduction to Gender and Caste states, “…newer forms of violence are often complemented by the sexual harassment and molestation of dalit women, pointing to the caste and gendered forms of vulnerability that dalit women experience” (11). The easiest way to perpetuate violence and humiliate Dalit men is through their women: “Rape and molestation are the new dimensions of Caste war, used as weapons of reprisals and to crush the morale of a section of people” (R.N. Bhagwati qtd. in Karan Singh 48). Dalit woman’s body is viewed as a mode of marking upper caste hegemony: “…the bodies of dalit women are seen collectively as mute, and capable of bearing penetration and other modes of marking upper-caste hegemony without the intervention of a discourse of desire and/or sexuality
because of the over determination of this violence as caste privilege” (A. Rao, “Understanding Sirsagaon,” 293). The upper caste men due to the caste privilege possess the power to humiliate and molest a Dalit woman. Sharmila Rege in her article “Caste and Gender: The Violence Against Women in India” writes:

> In several instances the rape of Dalit women may not be considered as rape at all because of the customary access that the upper caste men have had to Dalit women’s sexuality. In almost all regional languages in India the word for ‘rape’ is equivalent to the phrase ‘stealing the honour of’ and since lower caste women by the virtue of their double oppression have no ‘honour’ to speak of the right to redressal is often denied. (30)

Therefore, in context of Dalit women “the muted voice is not only individual but also communal” (Karan Singh 50).

Dalit women are taken as silent receivers of patriarchal notion of supremacy of males. They work hard within the home as well as outside and are major contributors in the running of the household expenses: “…it is the women’s income that goes towards the survival of the family since the husbands income is spent on arrack or bigamy being common….” The male members—father, brother, husband—are always on the look out to snatch the hard earned money by force or violence. Besides exploitation at home, sometimes these women are pushed into prostitution either because of poverty or by the upper caste people “thereby pushing the majority of these…into hidden form of prostitution” (Rege, “Caste and Gender,” 30).

However, these harsh realities are overlooked by the Dalit male writers in their exaggeration in praising Dalit patriarchy as democratic and less rigid as compared to upper caste society. They claim that a Dalit woman has freedom and can work outside her house with her male counterpart. Moreover, they propagate that if a Dalit man beats his wife, the wife can retaliate:

> …the beaten-up wife has a right to make the attack public by shouting, abusing the husband and, if possible, by beating the husband in return. The women and the men in community both have the right to interfere, arbitrate and take the quarrel to the caste panchayats. (Ilaiah 40)
Dr. Anita Ghosh refutes this assertion in her article “Dalit Feminism: A Psycho-Social Analysis of Indian English Literature” by stating that Dalit woman’s shouting back and beating her husband cannot be a reflection of democratic patriarchy:

The Dalit woman shouts back not because of “democratic patriarchy” but because of the socio-economic situation she is trapped in. The Dalit woman, more often than not is dependent on her own labour. She labours outside her home from morning till evening. When she comes home, her husband will be waiting to snatch her hard-earned money which is often the only source to feed the family. If she refuses to give him the money, the husband beats her up. The woman shouts back; in the process of resistance, she might beat him back. This is not because of democratic patriarchy in her family. (58-59)

It is very important to know the reasons behind her shouting. It is her brutal economic and sexual exploitation at the hands of her husband which she resists and that makes her shout.

The activism of Dalit women can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century. The early movement of untouchables in Maharashtra saw the active participation of Dalit women when a: “Nagpur woman, a nurse described her experiences of untouchability to the all-India women’s conference of 1920” (Moon and Pawar, “We Made History, Too” 49-50). With the coming of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar at the forefront of Dalit movement more Dalit women came forward: “Dr. Ambedkar organized several conferences of the Untouchables. He saw to it that women’s conferences were held simultaneously with those for men” (50). By 1930 Dalit women started conducting their own conferences: “The first session of the all-India Depressed Classes Congress was held at Nagpur on 8th to 10th August 1930, presided over by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. In this conference a separate women’s session was held on the 10th. The women gave speeches supporting the stand taken by Ambedkar in the Round Table Conference” (Pawar and Moon, We Also Made History 137). During the “the historic satyagraha movement” in Mahad in 1927 for the rights of Dalits to have access to the public water tanks “Dalit women not only participated in the processions with Dr. Ambedkar but also participated in the deliberations of the subject committee meetings in passing resolutions about the claim for equal human rights” (Moon and Pawar, “We Made History, Too,” 50).
Hundreds of Untouchable women participated in “sit-in agitations” (50) in front of temple and courted arrest during Nasik Satyagraha, started by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in 1930 for the right of untouchables to enter Hindu temples. In 1956, the untouchable women supported Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s declaration of conversion to a non-Hindu religion:

The speeches of women, reported exhaustively in Janata Weekly, show that women were very frank in stating that they wanted a religion that would recognize their freedom, dignity, and equal status with men. They expressed confidence that Dr. Ambedkar would not drag them into a religion where women would have to wear the burkha or live in purdah. (50-51)

The conferences of Dalit women held at Nagpur in 1942, at Kanpur in 1944, at Bombay in 1945, and at Calcutta in 1946 saw a large participation of Dalit women. Whether it was: “…the Mahad Satyagrahs, the Kalaram or Mukhed of Ambadevi Satyagraha; the dalit women have since then been in the forefront just as they were in the satyagraha of the landless in 1960-1965 which was a ‘jail Bharo’ Satyagraha” (Dolas 115). However, the contributions of Dalit women in Dalit movement were not acknowledged.

Dalit women who were privileged to participate in Dalit movement later organized Dalit women across India under the banner of “Dalit women’s movement” (Raj Kumar, Dalit Personal Narratives 214) and this gave birth to the term ‘Dalit feminism’: “The awareness regarding the position of dalit women as a special case within the overall dalit movement, along with the recognition of dalit women as essentially women who share some of the feminist concerns with main stream feminism, have been the distinctive features of rising dalit feminism” (Karan Singh 41). Some Dalit women took to writing: “Their articulation of their experiences came to be known as Stri Dalit Sahitya in Marathi” (Raj Kumar, Dalit Personal Narratives 214). The significant event in the rise of Dalit women on socio-political and literary scene was the foundation of National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) in 1987. The objective of this organization was to remove all Vedic Brahmanical traditions.

The position of Dalit women is paradoxical. A negligible number of women among Dalit women have risen to a relatively better status through salaried or service
sectors because of reservation policies and through various schemes of the centre and state governments. However, these women are constantly reminded of their Dalit status by others despite their achievements: “…an educated urban Dalit woman experiences torturous and agonising moments continuously in her day to day life, when she is reminded constantly of her ‘Dalit’ status by others despite achievements and accomplishments of her own or those of her husband or father” (Bhoite viii). Again there is marked difference between the situations affecting a Dalit woman living in urban area and the one living in rural area. Urban Dalit women are found engaged in rather secular, “monetized occupational activities” (Punalekar 9). The socio-economical condition of an urban Dalit woman has over a period of time undergone a change but the condition of rural Dalit woman is more or less the same. She still toils and suffers within the house, outside the house, in the working area and in the society at large:

In rural areas Dalit women are closely identified with their caste status and associated social disabilities. Therefore, these women suffer all deprivations which their caste group as a whole suffers. Besides, they have to undergo additional hardships because of their gender. Here again, economic situation has important bearing on the life of rural Dalit women. (Punalekar 13)

In order to understand the nuances of the different aspects of Dalit women, her whole range of experience “as a woman, as a dalit, as a dalit woman and as a poor dalit woman” (Karan Singh 66) needs to be studied.

Dalit women face marginalization in society, but even in literature they are pushed to the periphery. Dalit male writers have put forth an exaggerated and romanticized impulse of Dalit women: “The romanticizing impulse towards dalit women, creating a false aura around them, is a result of search for dalit distinctiveness in male dalit writers” (58). Dalit woman is visibly absent in the writings of Dalit male writers:

It is a province in which females enter as a prop to the hero who struggles hard against heavy odds to achieve a place in a largely inimical society….Women in this battlefield of life enter mostly in the garbs of mothers…domestic violence, inequality in matters of care and food never enter his vision…the portrayal of women in male dalit writers’ novels suffers from surfeit and scarcity – excess of caste questions and paucity of life-like images of females. (68)
The stalk reality of the burden of caste as well as patriarchy on Dalit women is not the focus in male Dalit writings. Dalit women are presented merely as appendage to the Dalit male protagonists and are worshipped as mothers, daughters and wives who efface themselves for the sake of their male counterparts and families. In Sharan Kumar Limbale’s life narrative *Akkarmashi* (1984) translated into English as *The Outcaste* (2003), the women like Shantamai and Masamai show the signs of compassion but Dalit women’s feelings and resistance are largely missing from the text. In Joseph Macwan’s *The Stepchild: Angaliyat* (2004) both Methi and Kanku are seen through “patriarchal mirrors of purity of attachment, self-sacrifice and devotion to their lovers. This approval of conventional framework seems, on the one hand, to undermine the revolt and negation of dalit literature, while on the other, it presents female characters inadequately by portraying them in dominant Brahmanic literary tradition” (84). A suitable exposition of feminist concerns is lacking in these narratives. Kancha Ilaiah in his life narrative *Why I Am Not A Hindu* writes:

> Within Dalithbujan patriarchy, woman is an agent of both production and reproduction. The domains of man and woman are not completely bifurcated at home and in the field….While cooking or doing agrarian tasks or while performing caste occupational operations, there are no gender restrictions in belief or practice. In these spheres specializations are not gender specific. (46)

Thus, Dalit women’s position within Dalit community is highly idealized. *Joothan*, Omparkash Valmiki’s life narrative gives a very sketchy view of women alongside the narrator’s conflict with caste ridden society:

> …it is noticeable that *Joothan* focuses primarily on how caste becomes a stumbling block in dalit male’s attempt to lead a dignified life. In his preoccupation with his own war against caste, the writer doesn’t get time or energy to explore more fully female characters in the novel. Even his marriage with Chanda becomes possible only due to his hatred for the schemes of his mama. There does not seem to be any romantic angle in their coming together and the writer does not develop her character in the course of the story. (Karan Singh 104).

Hence, the central issue of *Joothan* is caste atrocities and disabilities. Jyoti Lanjewar observes, “While portraying the oppression and rape of Dalit women, some writers have become ungenerous, and by presenting her as weak and helpless have shown her as a
victim of the circumstances….Dalit writers, with a few exceptions, have not paid attention to the fact that Dalit women’s life is worth contemplation” (“Dalit Literature,” 192). There is no consideration for Dalit women’s lives as individuals, or for their hardships and their feelings.

On the other hand, upper caste women’s writings also fail to represent Dalit women. Analyzing the position of Dalit women in mainstream women’s poetry, Anuradha Deepak in her article “Contemporary Women’s Poetry in India and Dalit Poetry: The Monologic Discourses of Resistance” comments:

...women’s poetry, we can say that it talks about only the caste Hindu women predominantly....As such, they are not and cannot be familiar to the sufferings and experiences of the down-trodden. Their poetry hardly gives us any insight into the life-style of a dalit Indian woman, viz: a scavenger’s daughter or a cobbler’s wife, etc. (124)

Their writings do protest against gender discrimination but the specificity of Dalit women’s distress and sufferings due to caste and class marginalization are absent in their works. The life narratives like Ramabai Ranade’s Amchya Ayushatil Kahi Athvani (1910, The Memories of Our Life Together), Laxmibai Tilak’s Smritichitra (1930, Sketches from Memory), Rassundari Devi’s Amar Jiban (1897, My Life), Ramadevi Choudhari’s Jiwan Pathe (1984, Into the Sun: An Autobiography), etc., have received praise for the articulation of pain but caste rarely appears in these life narratives.

Karan Singh further explores that even the upper caste male writers have not done justice to Dalit women:

In the novels of non-dalit male writers dalit women fall prey to twin ideological structures—one which sees them as natural, spontaneous and primordial, while the other partakes them as indivisible part of oppressed human society. While the former exalts them to the state of idol, the latter marks them off as invisible. (105)

Dalit woman largely disappears from the plot of their novels, for example in Untouchable by Mulk Raj Anand: “The novel lacks a feminist stance in the sense that most of the female characters are seen as either instruments of caste prejudices or fellow sufferers. Despite its having a rich texture, the female characters occupy marginal space and are seen as providing only an alternate angle to the exploitative posture of caste system.”
Moreover, in *Samskara*, U.E. Anantha Murthy “looks at them through rose-tinted spectacles” (111). Karan Singh in his analysis of Murthy’s *Samskara* observes, “An impulse to surround dalit women with images from natural world, without the attendant description of hunger, exploitation and violence of their lives mars Anantha Murthy’s presentation of dalit women in *Samskara*” (122). *Godan* by Premchand also betrays “a congruous approach towards Dalit women” (128). In *Godan*, “the elisions and the paucity of space” provided to Dalit women indicate their “neglect in the so-called mainstream novels” (129).

Dalit literature is incomplete as long as Dalit women are mute. After being neglected and marginalized for a long period, Dalit women have themselves taken the initiative towards their emancipation. They have started narrating their life experiences of marginalization: “It is at this point that Dalit women writers stepped in and completed the incomplete literature. Dalit women writers pose questions to the society that interrogates the hierarchies and hegemonies” (Rani 23). Dalit women writers are few as compared to Dalit male writers. Bama testifies, “…this lag is not due to the lack of literary potential in the Dalit women writers” (Basu, “Narratives” 195). It is the socio-cultural set up of the society that marginalizes Dalit women. Dalit women are narrating their experiences, their feelings, their lives, their own community and how society at large looks upon them and their sexuality. The phenomenon of Dalit women’s writing is not the recent one. Dalit women’s writings can be traced in *Bhakti* period. Janabai, Rami and Atukuri Molla are well known Dalit writers of *Bhakti* period. Janabai writes in one of her *abhangas*:

Let me not be sad because I am born a woman  
In this world; many saints suffer in this way. (Janabai 82)

Atukuri Molla is considered to be the first woman poet in Telugu. She was from a potter’s family. She rewrote the *Ramayana* in Telugu, known as *Molla Ramayanam*. Rami was a rebel in her times:

What can I say, friend?  
I don’t have enough worlds!  
Even as I weep when I tell you this story  
My accursed face breaks into laughter! (Rami 86)
The last phase of twentieth century and the beginning of twenty-first century have seen the emergence of Dalit women’s literature which continues to progress at present. Some of the well-known and acclaimed Dalit women writers from different states and regions of India like Meena Gajbhiye, Jyoti Lanjewar, Hira Bansode, Kunda Gaikwad, Gipal Gimekar, Surekha Bhagat, Asha Thorat, Pratibha Gedam, Usha Bhalerao, Vesapogu Gulbanamma, Tadi Nagamma, Jala Mangamma, Mukta Bai, Challapalli Swarooparani, Mukta Sarvagod, Kumud Pawade, Shantabai Krishnaji Kamble, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Nalini Jameela, Baby Halder, Bama and P. Sivakami, etc., are breaking their silence through writing. In their writings, they represent their sufferings and marginalization. According to Jyoti Lanjewar, Dalit women through their writings “have done justice not only to women but also to men” (“Dalit Literature,” 197). In their writings, Dalit women bring to the forefront the caste and gender discrimination and also make a call to their oppressors to bring amendment in their attitude.

A “narrative text” is a “text in which a narrative agent tells a story” (Bal 16). Narratives can be divided into two categories: (a) Fiction (b) Non-fiction. Fiction is “a Narrative that is imagined. It is, at least in part, made up by the writer.” Non-fiction is “a Narrative that is (mostly) an account of events that actually occurred, or opinions on those real events” (“What are”). It can be a biography, history, or life narrative. The narrative agent “or narrator”, as Mieke Bal remarks, is “a function and not a person, which expresses itself in the…text” (16). Narratives, according to the “‘voice’ of narrator” are referred as “‘first-person’ or ‘third-person’” or “‘second-person’” (21) narratives. The first-person narrative is “character-bound narrator” as “I is to be identified with a character” in the narrative. A character-bound narrator proclaims that “it recounts true facts about her- or himself” (22). Narratives where the person narrating the story “is not a character in the story, but seems to know everything about everybody in the story are called third person narratives” (Nayar, Studying Literature 67). Second-person narrative is a narrative in which “one of the characters is referred to as ‘you’, so that the reader feels that the storyteller is addressing her/him….Here the reader is drawn into the story as one of the characters” (68).
The other important element in the narrative is “focalisation.” Focalization means “‘viewpoint’ or ‘perspective’, which is to say the point-of-view from which the story is told” (Barry 232). Gerard Genette in Narrative Discourse identifies three types of focalization. The first type is “zero focalization” (189) in which the author “will freely enter the minds and emotions of more than one of the characters, as if privy to the thoughts and feel-ings of all of them” (Barry 233). The second type is “internal focalization” (Genette 189) in which “the focus is on what the characters think and feel, these being things which would be inaccessible” to reader. The “internally focalized representation of” the character “reveals her unspoken thoughts and feelings” which a reader “could be completely unaware of even if” reader is “standing next to her.” The character “can be called the ‘focaliser’ of the tale…readers are being given the events from her ‘point-of-view’” (Barry 233). In this type, the focus can be on one as well as more than one character. The third type is “external focalization” (Genette 190) in which “the viewpoint is outside the character depicted, so that one is told only things which are external or observable - that is, what the characters say and do, these being things” the reader will “hear and see for” herself/himself if she/he is “present at the scene depicted” (Barry 233).

Life narrative is the “act of people representing what they know best, their own lives…” In this kind of narrative, the narrator represents and is narrating her/his own life story. The narrator in the act of narration becomes both the “observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation” (Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography 1).The act of narration or telling about oneself “is a way of imposing a certain shape and meaning to the life that one has had.” It is an act of exploration of “one’s own identity and the essence of one’s existence” (Bhatt 1). This act has both “therapeutic as well as empowering role” (2) in the life of the narrator.

Life narrative is a common term used for the acts of self-representation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the narrator’s life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital. It can be in written form like autobiography, memoir, diary, collaborative life writing, etc., or it can be a video or film both visual and verbal; art like painting, sculpture; photographic, etc. It can be oral performance that has
existed in many indigenous cultures prior to literacy like the naming songs of Native American cultures, the oral narratives of genealogy and descent among Africans, the communal self-locating songs of indigenous Australian songs and so on. There are modes of written self-inscription in China and in Japan as early as thousand years ago; in India during the medieval period, the Bhakti poetry of devotional engagement with the sacred existed. Hence, the practice of writing autobiographically has a history “extending back to, and perhaps before, the Greeks and Romans in antiquity…” (Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography 103).

The origin of the term “autobiography” (103) took place in the west in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The term first appeared in the review of Isaac D’Israeli’s Miscellanies by William Taylor of Norwich in the English periodical the Monthly Review (1797). Robert Southey used it in the Quarterly Review in 1809. In Greek “autos denotes “self,” bios “life,” and graphe “writing”” (1). As such taken together into consideration “the words self life writing offer a brief definition of autobiography” (Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography 1). Stephen Spender, British poet and critic, cites the dictionary definition of autobiography as “the story of one’s life written by himself.” Philippe Lejeune, the French theorist, calls autobiography as “…the retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principal accent upon his life, especially upon the story of his own personality” (qtd. in Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography 1). Autobiography is the retrospective narration of one’s own past or life as lived.

The other terms for life narrative are ‘Self biography’ and ‘Self life writing.’ In the first half of the eighteenth century, the terms like “memoir (Madame de Stael, Gluckel of Hamlen) or the life (Teresa of Avila) or the book of my life (Cardano) or confessions (Augustine, Rousseau) or essays of myself (Montaigne)…” were in vogue. Later on, a host of terms like “testimonio, autoethnography, and psychobiography” (Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography 2) have been coined to designate the self-referential writing.

‘Memoir’ is “recollections often bracketed one moment or period of experience rather than an entire life span and offers reflections on its significance for the writer’s
previous status or self-understanding” (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 3-4). Hence, narration in the memoir is centered on one moment or experience and focus is on its significance in the narrator’s life and her/his self-understanding. Nancy K. Miller states, “…memoir…hesitates to define the boundaries private and public, subject and object” (2). In memoir, the boundary between private and public or subject and object often blurs.

In Collaborative life narrative, two persons are involved “one is the investigator, who does the interviewing and assembles a narrative from the given primary materials; the second is the informant, who tells a story through interviews or informal conversations.” The situation is triangulated among three or more parties when someone undertakes the translation and transcription from the indigenous language: “Someone must undertake the translation and transcription from the indigenous language for the person who finally “edits” the narrative into a metropolitan language, such as English, and a culturally familiar story form, such as traditional autobiography or the ethnographic “life.”” However, the process of telling, translating and then editing questions the authenticity and originality of oral narrative: “This complex nexus of telling, translating, and editing introduces a set of issues about the process of appropriating and overwriting the original oral narrative” (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 67). For instance, in *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life story of a Holy Man of the Ogalala Sioux as Told to John G. Neihardt*, G. Thomas Couser argues that the native informant in a “transcultural interview situation may “speak with fork tongue”” (qtd. in Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 67).

However, collaborative life narrative has wider significance. Collaborative life narrative is a: “…multilingual, transcultural process, can be a situation of coercion and editorial presented in the name of preserving the voice, the experience, and the culture of the life narrator” (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 68). The main objective behind the collaborative life narrative is to preserve the voice of native and to make it accessible to the wider audience.

and agency as important aspects of life narrative. The life narrator relies on “access to memory” to communicate the past “in such a way as to situate” that “experiential history within the present.” Remembering is “a reinterpretation of the past in the present.” It is an active and creative process and not a mere retrieval from a memory bank. The narrator while remembering “creates the meaning of the past….Thus, narrated memory is an interpretation of a past that can never be fully recovered” (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 22).

Memories are the records and brain acts as a store. Daniel L. Schacter suggests:

...memories are records of how we have experienced events, not replicas of the events themselves. Experiences are encoded by brain networks whose connections have already been shaped by previous encounters with the world. This preexisting knowledge powerfully influences how we encode and store new memories, thus contributing to the nature, texture, and quality of what we recall of the moment. (6)

He further states that life narratives are constructed “from fragments of experience that change over time” (9). Thus, memory plays an important role in the construction of a life narrative.

History and culture direct the process of remembering: “How people remember, what they remember, and who does the remembering are historically specific. A culture’s understanding of memory at a particular moment of its history shapes the life narrator’s process of remembering” (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 23). Hence, the culture of subjugation which might have been present prior is always in the memory of narrator.

The remembering is “not... an entirely a privatized activity” but is “situated in cultural politics.” Considering this “we can appreciate to what degree remembering is a collective activity” (25). Maurice Halbwachs states, “Collective memory...retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive” (80). According to Maurice Halbwachs, “The concept of collective memory helps explain how societies develop notions of shared national history and even how individuals acquire their own memories related to the social frameworks of family, religion, and social class” (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 26).
Hence, in the words of Ron Eyerman “collective memory is defined as recollections of a shared past “that are retained by members of a group, large or small, that experienced it”” (5). Therefore, collective memory is “a memory or memories shared or recollected by a group, as a community or culture” (“collective memory” def. 1) or “any collection of memories passed from one generation to the next” (def.2). Collective memory is a memory which an individual shares with a group or community as its member.

The narrator incorporates numerous methods and archives of recalling in their narratives. Some of these sources are personal like dreams, family albums, photos, objects, family stories, genealogy, etc. Other sources can be public, for instance, documents, historical events, collective rituals, and so on.

Mediated through memory ““experience” is already an interpretation of the past and of our place in a culturally and historically specific present” (Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography 31). The narrator in the life narrative knows herself/himself as subject of particular sorts of experience attached to her/his social status and identity. This subject knows herself/himself to be a woman or a man or a child or a worker or a labourer. Joan W. Scott in her essay “Experience” states, “It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience” (25-26). Hence, in a life narrative, it is the experience which constructs the subject.

To tell a particular kind of life story is to interest the reader: “Readers have expectations about who has the cultural authority to tell a particular kind of life story. They also have expectations about what stories derived from direct, personal knowledge should assert” (Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography 36). In the narration, the life narrators can claim the ““authority of experience” both explicitly and implicitly.” Implicit claims refer to narrative by the public figures and celebrities like Nelson Mandela, Queen Latifah, Eric Clapton, Mahatma Gandhi, etc., whose name “assures the reader of the authority of the writer to tell his or her story and aims to make the story a credible disclosure to its audience” (33).
However, the ‘authority of experience’ is explicit and overt in the case of persons who are outside the dominant culture, who are unknown and marginalized by virtue of their lack of public status:

...a previously “voiceless” narrator from a community not culturally authorized to speak – the slave, the nonliterate, the child, the inmate of a mental hospital, the formerly colonized, for instance—finds in identification the means and the impetus to speak publicly. (34)

The authority of an ex-slave is explicit and overt in the slave narrative, of a Holocaust survivor in the Holocaust narrative, or of an immigrant in the survivor-descendent or exile.

The notion of identity centers on a paradoxical combination of sameness and difference. The word ‘identity’ has its roots in Latin word *idem* which means identical. The meaning of the term rests on the idea that “not only are we identical with ourselves...but we are identical with others. That is, we share common identities – as humans, say, but also, within this, as ‘women’, ‘men’, ‘British’, ‘American’, ‘white’, ‘black’, etc.” (Lawler 19). Therefore, identity involves “identification” (2) and confirms some form of commonality.

There is another aspect of identity, which suggests people’s uniqueness, that is their “difference” (2) from others:

Identities materialize within collectivities and out of the culturally marked differences that permeate symbolic interactions within and between collectivities. One is a “woman” in relation to a “man.” One is a “disabled” person in relation to someone who is seen as “able.” Identities are marked in terms of many categories: gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, class, generation, family genealogy, religious belief, and political ideologies, to list the most obvious. These are differences that, at least for now, have meaning in the material and symbolic structures that organize human societies. (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 38)

Identities are always implicated in the process of social exchange and hence are temporary, changeable and are always in the process of construction. Stuart Hall argues: “Identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (222). Hence, identity is a continual process.
No person has single identity. There is always identification with more than one group. For example, a Dalit woman sees herself as woman but also speaks as a Dalit. Steph Lawler in *Identity: Sociological Perspectives* argues:

No one has only one identity, in the sense that everyone must, consciously or not, identify with more than one group, one identity….As several feminist writers have pointed out, identities impact on each other. It is not as though one could have gendered identity, for example, and then, in addition to that, a raced identity, and then, somewhere ‘on top of’ that, a sexual identity and so on….Different forms of identity, then, should be seen as interactive and mutually constitutive, rather than ‘additive’. They should also be seen as dynamic. (3)

Hence, gender oppression does not act in isolation but along with caste, race, or class identity.

According to Maya Angelou, “It is the collective memory of slavery that defines an individual as a “race member”” (Eyerman 3). Ron Eyerman substantiates this as “Slavery formed the root of an emergent collective identity through an equally emergent collective memory, one that signified and distinguished a race, a people, or a community…” (1). Hence, “collective identity refers to the shared definition of a group that derives from its members’ common interests, experience, and solidarities. It is the social movement’s answer to who we are, locating the movement within a field of political actors” (Whooley 70). As experience is always embedded in the memories, therefore, collective identity refers to the shared sense of belonging to a group or a community having common interests and experience. This is a thread that unites the members of a particular group or a community together to work for a common cause: “…collective identity is “an interactive and shared definition” that is evocative of “a sense of ‘we’”’” (Snow).

The identity issue in life narrative is directly related to space. Kathleen A. Boardman and Gioia Woods observe that life narration is a “preoccupation with place, along with a focus on identity issues directly related to place: rootedness, anxiety, nostalgia, restlessness.” They further state that for some narrators: “…place is a problem to be solved; for others, it is the basis (or ‘ground’) for a claim to authenticity.” There are three vectors of location which are very important in the formation of identity: “physical,
rhetorical, and political.” These three vectors are not confined to the concept of geography. The location in life narrative “may be a space…where landscape becomes a horizon against and through which subjectivity is defined” (qtd. in Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography 43). Hence, the identity of the subject is constructed around the space inhibited by the subject in the life narrative.

However, life narrative is organized around “spaces of sociality”, that is relationships with others. Relationships and actions are structured “in communicative interaction and ritualized or identified by gesture and bodily positioning.” The life of the subject: “…is implicated in and impinges on the lives of others and may encapsulate their biographies” (Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography 44). The narrative is not only about the subject but also reflects upon the lives of people who are related to the subject.

Postcolonial theory emphasizes location of colonized subjects as the “third space” (157), the term used by Homi Bhabha. The concept of location in “third space” is crucial in theorizing postcolonial life narratives by the writers and critics like Jamaica Kincaid, Maryse Conde, Wole Soyinka etc. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in Reading Autobiography state that in such narratives:

…the “I” is often representative of a larger group’s experience at powerful moments of social change and an articulation of the desire for transformation as a social group. (Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography 46)

The ‘colonized subject’ in the postcolonial life narratives represents and is voice of the whole group to which it belongs and speaks for the change within the social system.

The concept of space used in life narrative is not only a factual scene of narration and sense of place but it:

…delineate the psychic terrain of reflection for writers shuttling between social and private worlds or present-day locations and erased pasts…life writing as itself an artifact in the space of publication and circulation, its paratextual surround.…Life narrative inevitably ensues from and is situated in spaces of many kinds. (48–49)

Therefore, the subject in the life narrative is always in move between the social and private location as private is inseparable from social space.
The autobiographical narrators are “embodied subjects”, that is they are always defined and identified in terms of their bodies. The subjects have bodies and “the body” is a site of “autobiographical knowledge because memory itself is embodied” and hence life narrative becomes inseparable from “memory, subjectivity, and the materiality of the body” (Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography 49). Culture directs the narration of body: “Cultural discourses determine which aspects of bodies become meaningful – what parts of the body are there for people to see. They determine when the body becomes visible, how it becomes visible, and what that visibility means” (50). The body as a “source and site of autobiographical utterance” (54) has always been present in life narration and cultural meanings assigned to “particular bodies affect the kinds of stories people can tell” (51).

Life narratives are read as acts and proofs of “human agency” because the human beings are agents and actors in their own lives. They are active subjects rather “than passive subjects of social structures or unconscious transmitters of cultural scripts and models of identity.” The autobiographical narratives are the sites of “agentic narration” where people control “the interpretation of their lives and stories”, “telling of individual destinies”, and “expressing “true” selves.” Therefore, life narratives are often read as “narratives of agency” (54).

The aim of narrating one’s life story “is to set the record straight of an individual’s achievements” (Raj Kumar, Dalit Personal Narratives 3). However, in Dalit life narratives, Dalit narrators not only “celebrate their selves” (3-4) but also record a life full of distress: “…the Dalit narrator has to record a life which is full of pain and suffering because of the caste system.” Through their life narratives Dalits are “mobilizing resistance to fight against all forms of oppressions which they have been experiencing for ages” (4).

Margret Oliphant in her review-article “New Books (No. XV)” in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine lays emphasis on study of the life narratives of common men and women because it is they who construct a society:

…to study the alternative autobiographical narratives of the ‘commoners’ comprised of ordinary men and women, sailors, soldiers and others.
Oliphant was, perhaps, making a vital point that after industrial revolution had shaken the very life force of English society, the possibilities of renewing the world-order rested not with the philosophers like Mill but with the common folk who were at the epicenter of English life and culture. (Raj Kumar, *Dalit Personal Narratives* 38)

The argument of Oliphant is important in context of the study of the Dalits’ life narratives because in Indian society Dalits are “socio-culturally placed in a marginal position even though their contributions to the making of Indian society and culture are quite great” (38).

Dalit life narratives have changed the dynamics of the Indian literary scene. They have destabilized the old canon. Dalit life narratives present the life experiences of Dalits with the aim to bring about a social change. Critics like Gangadhar Pantawane and Chandrakumar Nalage use the word “‘self-stories’ (*Atmakatha*) or ‘self-reportings’ (*Atma vritta*)” (Sargar 1) for these life narratives. In these narratives, the narrator’s ‘self’ is always in conflict with oppressive social and cultural conditions: “…while narrating the experiences of his life, the author…successfully creates the image of his ‘self’ in conflict with oppressive social and cultural conditions….‖ (1-2). In Dalit life narratives, the ‘self’ of the author reflects both his/her individual self and the social self because the narrator identifies himself/herself with his/her social group. There is a feeling that the other members of the group also suffer in the same way:

The narrator, while presenting a portrayal of his own ‘self’, narrates certain experiences, which are common in the lives of all the members of his community. The ‘self’ is depicted not only as an individual with a private career but also as a member of his community with ties and responsibilities to the other members of his community. The ‘self’ is not isolated from its social group because as a member of that social group he, too, has received similar inhuman and humiliating treatment by the established social structure. His personal experiences and the experiences of any other member of his community are usually the same. (1-2)

Hence, the ‘self’ in Dalit life narratives “is a part and parcel of its community.” Naturally, such life narratives present “the unity of the personal voice and the voice of the people” (2). Raj Kumar observes:

Most of these narratives are tales of personal sufferings of the Dalit writers fused with their interpersonal responses and community feelings which
they experience in a Hindu society. On the face of several oppressive social forces, these writers, with their growing perceptions and mature imagination, capture the tensions which grow out of a continuous battle between ‘loss of identity’ and ‘asserting of self.’ (Dalit Personal Narratives 150)

Thus, the process of narrating their lives by the Dalits is a form of “resistance against various forms of oppression….The ‘confession’ is mostly made to invoke the bitter experiences the authors have gone through in their lives” (150). Dalit narratives underscore the cruel and inhuman social order which has crushed Dalits and made their lives unhappy and unbearable under the veil of social and religious customs.

Life narratives by Dalit women are few in number. One of the reasons is the prevailing illiteracy among Dalit women. The struggle to survive compels them to remain away/give up education after a certain stage. However, some illiterate women if given a chance to speak about themselves “can narrate their joys as well as sorrows to someone who can help document their narrative voices” (Raj Kumar, Dalit Personal Narratives 210). The collaborative life narratives like Sumitra Bhave’s Pan on Fire, originally compiled in Marathi in 1988, contains life-stories of eight Dalit women and the collaborative life narrative titled Viramma: Life of an untouchable (originally written in French, published in 1995; translated into English, published in 1997) are the examples in which Dalit women’s experiences and sufferings are documented.

Some of the literate Dalit women have written their life narratives in regional languages as “English is still a language of the dominant caste and class” (211). Some well known Dalit female life narratives are: Antasphot (Marathi, 1981) by Kumud Pawade; Miitleli Kavaade (Marathi, 1983) by Mukta Sarvagod; Jina Amucha (Marathi, 1986) by Baby Kamble; Majya Jalmachi Chittarkantha (Marathi, 1988) by Shantabai Krishnaji Kamble; Ratrandin Amha (Marathi, 1990) by Shantabai Dhanaji Dani, Marankala (Marathi, 1992) by Janabai Kachru Girhe; Teen Dalgachi Chul (Marathi, 2000) by Vimal Dadasaheb More; Aalo Aandhari (Bengali, 2004) by Baby Halder; Karukku (Tamil, 1992) by Bama; Aaydan (Marathi, 2003) by Urmila Pawar; Oru Laingikatozhilaliyute Atmakatha (Malayalam, 2005) by Nalini Jameela; Dohra Abhishap
All these life narratives depict the marginalization and struggle of Dalit women in society:

Their primary purpose is to document and record the history of popular struggles, foreground experiential and historical “truth” which has been erased or rewritten in hegemonic, elite, or imperialist history, and bear witness in order to change oppressive state rule…their strategy is to speak from within a collective, as participants in revolutionary struggles, and to speak with the express purpose of bringing about social and political change. (Mohanty 81)

Dalit women’s life narratives aim to voice the unspoken and unheard to bring about a change in the society.

Some of Dalit women’s life narratives are further translated into various languages. On the importance of translation of Dalit women’s writing, K. Suneetha Rani emphasizes, “The need for translation also emerges from the fact that the voices that want to reach or have to reach people of different parts of the world remain partly unsuccessful as most of them write in “regional” languages, thus defeating the purpose of raising the voice with a community cause and political purpose.” The translator looks at herself/himself as a “medium through which the voices are being transmitted” (19). She stresses:

…that translation is definitely not a mere carrying across, definitely reworking of the text, but not a reworking of meaning. If the meaning is reworked on and reconstructed, then it cannot be the writer’s text. It will be the text only of the translator whereas a translation, I feel, is the text of both the writer and translator. Especially in the context of Dalit women’s writing, if the meaning is reworked then the very purpose of this writing will be defeated (20-21),

thus emphasizing that a translator while translating a text needs to observe that translation should be a reworking of the text and not a reworking of the meaning.

The life narratives chosen for the present study are Baby Kamble’s Jina Amucha (written in Marathi, published in 1986; translated into English by Maya Pandit as The Prisons We Broke and published in 2008), Urmila Pawar’s Aaydan (written in Marathi, published in 2003; translated into English by Maya Pandit as The Weave of My life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs and published in 2008), Bama’s Karukku (written in Tamil,
published in 1992; translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom and published in 2000), collaborative life narrative *Viramma: Life of an untouchable* (written in French, published in 1995 as *Une vie paria. Le rire des asservis, Inde du Sud*; translated into English by Will Hobson and published in 1997), Baby Halder’s *Aalo Aandhari* (originally written in Bengali, but was first published in Hindi in 2002. The Hindi translation of the Bengali text was done by Pramod Kumar. The Bengali text was published in 2004; later the narrative was translated into English from Hindi translation as *A Life Less Ordinary* by Urvashi Butalia and published in 2006), and Nalini Jameela’s life narrative *Oru Laingikatozhilaliyute Atmakatha* written in Malayalam and published in 2005; the second edition of it *Njan Laingika Thozhilali: Nalini Jameelayude Athmakatha* in Malayalam was published in 2006 which was translated into English by J. Devika as *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* and published in 2007.

This thesis is an endeavour to study the Dalit women writers’ distinctive voices of distress and narratives of sufferings using the theoretical formulations of Postcolonial feminism. Dalit women’s position in Postcolonial context is analyzed through the concept of ‘subaltern’ given by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s views on “Decolonizing Feminism” (Mohanty 9) and “Reorienting Feminism” (10); bell hooks’ observation on the margin as space for negotiation. Homi Bhabha’s concept of location in ‘third space’ and the thought and philosophy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar form an important component of critique. Views of the critics like Uma Chakravarti, Anita Ghosh, Sharmila Rege, Anupama Rao, Ruth Manorama, Cynthia Stephen and Gopal Guru are used for analyzing Dalit women’s life narratives. Mike Bal, Gerard Genette and Pramod K. Nayar’s readings of narratives and ‘narratology’ are used for analyzing Dalit women’s life narratives. The six components of life narratives—memory, experience, identity, body, space and agency proposed by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson form the central part of theoretical framework.

Baby Kamble was born in 1929. She was Mahar by caste; belonged to Phaltan, a small town in the Satara district of Maharashtra. Her father, Pandharinath, was a contractor. Baby Kamble, a veteran of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra, was involved with the Dalit struggle from a very young age. She established a government approved
residential school for socially backward students in Nimbure, a small village near Phaltan. Collections of her poetry have also been published. She was honoured with awards in recognition for her literary and social work.

Baby Kamble loved reading and writing but she was withdrawn from school after passing fourth class and married off at the age of thirteen. She helped her husband in running a small grocery shop: “packing groceries in old wrapping paper.” This was “the only contact she had with books and newspapers.” However, she began writing her personal narrative *Jina Amucha* “in the shop in the early part of the day when her husband went out to buy provisions” (Rege, *Writing Caste* 194). She hid her notebooks as she was afraid both of her husband and her son:

….I hid everything I wrote in the most ignored and dusty corners. My son had started going to school when I started to write. So for me he was a knowledgeable, learned man….My husband always called me an ignorant woman! I was afraid of his response. So I kept everything hidden away from their eyes for almost twenty years. (Kamble, *An Interview* 147)

Maxine Berstein, an American sociologist, working on scheduled castes came to Phaltan for her doctoral research. She met Baby Kamble for data collection; both became friends and she often accompanied Maxine Berstein on her field visits. Baby Kamble showed Maxine Berstein her notebooks. Maxine Berstein recognized the importance of her writing. She contacted Vidya Bal, the editor of the Marathi women’s magazine *Stree*, and got *Jina Amucha* serialized in this magazine in 1982. *Jina Amucha* was published as a book by Kulkarni in 1986. It was later translated into English as *The Prisons We Broke* (memoir) by Maya Pandit and published in 2008 by Orient Longman Pvt. Ltd. In *The Prisons We Broke*, Baby Kamble gives an account of the varied experiences of the Mahar community. She argues, “memories of humiliation and enslaved lives need to be reiterated because future generations must know about the fiery ordeal that the earlier generations have gone through….The lowly conditions of life…can be narrated without embarrassment for these were imposed and not a matter of choice” (Rege, *Writing Caste* 194). Baby Kamble places on record her acclaim for the Mahar women who emerged as the agents “of transformation in their community” (Pandit, Introduction, *The Prisons We Broke* xv). Baby Kamble passed away on April 21, 2012.
Urmila Pawar, another Dalit Indian woman writer, was born on May 7, 1945. Her mother Lakshmi Arjun Pawar and father Arjun Chimaji Pawar belonged to the Mahar caste in Konkan region of Maharashtra. She converted to Buddhism in 1956. She did her post graduation in Marathi language. She worked in the Public Works Department of Maharashtra. She being a well-known Marathi Dalit woman writer has remained a member of several social and literary bodies. She has also been a political activist of autonomous Dalit feminist organization in Mumbai and Konkan regions.


Urmila Pawar’s short story “Sahav Bot” (“Sixth Finger”) is the story of a woman who has to face the overwhelming pressure of being childless, followed by constant attacks on her character. This helpless woman is driven to depression because of the fingers being raised at her. The story “Aaye” (“Mother”) narrates the struggle of a widowed mother against the pressure of people who try to dictate her life for her. She struggles against all odds as the patriarchal system tries to take away her independence. The story “Vegli” (“The Odd One”) is about an ambitious working woman trying to rise above the roles which her caste and gender have imposed upon her in spite of being ostracized and criticized at every point by strangers as well as her in-laws. Her story “Kavach” (“Armor”) caused a tumult in the literary world. The story was termed as obscene. The story is about the repulsive tendency of men to crack obscene jokes, ambiguous double meaning words at the poor woman who comes to the market to sell
bananas, mangoes, pumpkins and other such vegetables. However, critics like Prabhakar Nerurkar, Nikhil Wagle and Madhav Gadkari openly defend her story. According to Veena Deo:

It is significant that this story of Pawar became a target of controversy in Mumbai in terms of language use and its appropriateness for young students. The charge of “vulgarity” leveled against the story clearly indicates the fear of those who control language when they are challenged to rethink their language use and their actions. After much deliberation, the story is now part of the curriculum at an all-women’s school (S.N.D.T College). (xxxvii)

Her travelogue *Mauritius: Ek Pravas* (*Mauritius: A Journey*) was published in 1994. Urmila Pawar attended the Second World Marathi Conference held in Mauritius as she was curious to know the fate of the people who had been taken away from India to work as sugarcane labourers in Mauritius. She collected information and interviewed a few people; the work has come out in a book titled *Mauritius: Ek Pravas* reflecting the life and struggle of sugarcane labourers.

A volume of two one-act plays *Don Ekankika* was published in 1996. Urmila Pawar’s work *Aamhihi Itihaas Ghadawala: Ambedkari Chalvalitil Streeyncha Sahabhag* co-authored with Meenakshi Moon originally written in Marathi was published in 1989. It was translated into English as *We Also Made History* by Wandana Sonalkar and published in 2008. This work is about the contribution and participation of Dalit women in Ambedkarite movement. She has also translated Buddha’s teachings into Marathi as *Udaan* (1989). The chronology *Dr. Ambedkar: Jeevankalpat* by Urmila Pawar was published in 2003.

Her autobiography *Aaydan*, originally written in Marathi was published in 2003 by Granthali, Mumbai. It was later translated into English as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs* by Maya Pandit and published in 2008 by Stree, Kolkata. In *The Weave of My Life*, she gives an account of her personal life and the discrimination she faced in context of caste. *Aaydan* has received four major awards: Maharashatra Foundation, USA; Priyadarshini Academy, Padmashree Vikhe Patil and Matoshree Bheemabai Ambedkar award. Urmila Pawar’s name was recommended for the
Laxamibai Tilak award by the Maharashtra Sahitya Parishad, Pune. However, she rejected the award:

…when she received the invitation letter with the programme of the award outlined in it. She was horrified to see that it would begin with ‘Sharadastwan’ (a prayer to goddess Saraswati) because she thought these brahminical practices went against the grain of the legacy of radical thinkers like Phule, Ambedkar and the Buddha.” (Pandit, Introduction, *The Weave of My Life* xxvi)

Bama Faustina Mary/Bama Faustina Soosairaj was born at Puthupatti near Madurai in 1958: “The name Bama generated from the author’s real name Faustina Mary Fathima. In Tamil, Fathima is pronounced as Bathima and from that the name Bama comes” (Rao and Ambhore 245). Her father Susairaj/Soosairaj served in the Indian army. Her mother Sebasthiamma was a homemaker. Bama’s ancestors who worked as agricultural labourers were Dalits (Paraya) converted to Christianity way back in the eighteenth century.

Bama had her early education in the school in the village and later went to a college some distance away from her village. After her schooling, she started her college studies at a village some distance away. Her memories of discrimination and humiliation she faced as a Dalit student during her school and college days are recorded in her life narrative *Karukku*. After graduation, she served as a nun for seven years. But here too she met disillusionment. She left the convent to set up a school for Dalit children in Uttiramerur.

Caste and gender discrimination are the two important themes which underline the works of Bama. Bama’s life narrative *Karukku* (memoir) was translated into English in 2000 by Lakshmi Holstrom and published by Macmillan India Limited in 2000. *Karukku* has also been translated into many Indian languages like Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada, etc., and the text has won the Crossword Award for translation in 2001.

Her other work *Kisumbukkaran*, a collection of short stories about the experiences of Dalit men and women, was published in 1996. It was translated into English as *Harum, Scarum Saar*. Her novel *Sangati* (1994) was also translated into English as *Events* by Lakshmi Holstrom in 2005. Bama states the theme of *Events* in her Preface as, “the
growth, decline, culture, and liveliness of Dalit women” (vii). She reminds Dalit women to stand up against the exploitation and to rise up from their predicament.

Her novel Vanmam was published in Tamil in 2002. Malini Seshadri translated Vanmam into English as Vendetta in 2008. Vendetta underscores enmity between Pallars and Parayas within Dalits: “In almost every region of India there are two main (Dalit) castes, often at odds” (Gail Omvedt qtd. in Mangai). Pallas identify themselves as Hindus and Parayas are Christian converts. Vendetta documents the hatred and vengeance among the various Dalit communities. The graded inequality that sustains caste order exists among the Dalits as well.

Her collection of short stories Oru Thathavum oru Erumaiyum (2003) narrates the social evils, atrocities unleashed on Dalit girls. Bama’s writings represent the emergence of the Dalit women’s writings on Tamil literary scene.

Viramma was a Pariah (the largest caste of Dalits in Tamil- speaking areas). She died in 2002. Viramma: Life of an untouchable is the life story of Viramma. Viramma: Life of an untouchable is a collaborative life narrative, the result of ten years of conversation between Viramma and Josiane Racine, the wife of Jean-Luc Racine, a French academic who came to India at the age of twenty- two. He taught at the French College in Pondicherry. Josaine was his student and got married to him after a long courtship. Viramma’s knowledge of popular songs and laments made her a valuable source for Josaine’s ethnomusicological research. This narrative originally written in French by Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine as Une vie paria. Le rire des asservis, Inde du Sud was published in 1995 by Librairie Plon. It was later translated into English by Will Hobson in 1997 and published by Verso in London. This work reveals the world of an extraordinary woman living at the very margins of the Indian society.

Baby Halder was born in Kashmir in 1973. Her father was in Indian army, posted in Jammu and Kashmir, when she was born. She spent her childhood in Murshidabad. Her father’s irresponsible behaviour forced her mother to abandon the family. Baby Halder was brought up by an abusive father and two step-mothers with whom she travelled from Murshidabad to Durgapur, West Bengal, where she grew up. At the age of
twelve, she was forced to leave the school. She was married to a man who was fourteen years older than her. Facing continuous violence at the hands of her father and after marriage at the hands of her husband left her dejected. She along with her three children ran to Delhi to escape the wrath of her husband. In Delhi, working as a maid, she came across Prabodh Kumar, a retired anthropology professor and grandson of well-known Hindi writer Munshi Premchand. Prabodh Kumar could see her love for reading and encouraged her to write her life story.

Baby Halder penned her autobiography *Aalo Aandhari* in Bengali meaning “From darkness to light” (*LLO* 73). The narrative was translated into Hindi by Prabodh Kumar and published in 2002. In Bengali, *Aalo Aandhari* was published in 2004. Urvashi Butalia translated the Hindi version of *Aalo Aandhari* into English as *A Life Less Ordinary*. *A Life Less Ordinary* was published by Zubaan, New Delhi in 2006. *A Life Less Ordinary* represents Baby Halder’s struggle to live an ordinary life and also to fight against the evils of patriarchal society. *A Life Less Ordinary* is a critique of the society which makes a woman, a dependent on man and thus a victim of his atrocities. Her second book *Eshat Roopantar* written in Bengali was published in 2010. The Hindi translation of *Eshat Roopantar* was also published in the same year, that is 2010. Baby Halder in *Eshat Roopantar* narrates the important incidents of her life.

Nalini Jameela hails from Thrissur in Kerala. She was born at Kalloor near Amballoor. She “came from a lower-middle class, lower caste (Ezhava) family” (Devika xii). Being a girl, she was removed from the school at the age of nine. At the age of eighteen, she was thrown out of the house by her father. Under compulsion, she became wife of Subrahmanyan without wedlock. After a few years of this relationship, Subrahmanyan died of cancer. In order to provide for her children, she entered into sex trade. After becoming a part of Jawalamukhi, an organization which works for awareness about HIV, she has become a well-known public face.

*The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* is a collaborative life narrative of Nalini Jameela. People like Paulson, Maitreyan and her colleagues encouraged her to write her life story and it was in 2003 that Nalini Jameela finally decided to write her autobiography. Gopinath, an activist and journalist in Thrissur, approached her in 2004
and offered to write her autobiography by taking down what she would tell him. When
published she found that it was not perfect. Therefore, she decided to write a revised
edition. The first version of her life narrative, *Oru Laingikatozhilaliyute Atmakatha*,
narrated to and written by Gopinath in Malayalam was published in 2005 by DC Books.
This went into six editions in one hundred days and thirteen thousand copies of it were
sold. The second version of her life narrative, *Njan Laingika Thozhilali: Nalini
Jameelayude Athmakatha*, in Malyalam narrated to and written by scholars and social
workers was published in 2006. The English translation of *Njan Laingika Thozhilali:
Nalini Jameelayude Athmakatha* as *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* was undertaken

In *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*, Nalini talks about her life as a sex worker.
She also exposes the hypocrisy of the society which hampers decent living for a woman
without a husband/man. This life narrative is not a salacious account of sexual exploits
but a deep touching narrative of the dark life of the sex workers and their exploitation.
Nalini Jameela’s second work *In the Company of Men: the Romantic Encounters of a Sex
Worker* is an extension of her autobiography in which she talks about “the many facets of
the men she encountered” (P. Nair). However, in an interview with Azhimugam.com, she
admits that due to lack of funds/money the book has not been published: “The interview
came after she put up a post on Facebook about how she needed help to publish a second
book as money was a big constraint” (“Malayalee men”).

Dalit women’s life narratives, once on the periphery of the culture and literature
are now essential to the core of culture as admitted by many critics like Sharmila Rege,
Uma Chkravorti and Gopal Guru. Gopal Guru in his Afterword to *The Prisons We Broke*
(2008) states that the life narratives by Dalit women are “a much recent phenomenon,
probably dating back to a mere twenty years. Dalit women from Maharashtra, and later
from Tamil Nadu, have taken the lead in writing their own story without fictionalizing
it.” These life narratives have “reduced the difference between the word and the world.
These self-stories are written in speech that is embodied in them” (159).

Sharmila Rege in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women’s
Testimonies* (2006) argues that Dalit women’s narratives offer “counter narratives that
challenge[d] the selective memory univocal history both of the dalit and the women’s movements” to make known in “a consciously modern sense of what it means to be a dalit woman,...” (75-76). Dalit women’s life narratives narrate the sufferings of Dalit women due to caste hegemony as well as patriarchy.

Clara Nubile in her book *The Danger of Gender* (2003) comments, “Dalit women authors such as Shantabai Kamble, Kumud Pawade, Mukta Sarvagod and Babytai Kamble started to write autobiographies thus adding the gender point of view on Dalit life” (83). Dalit women’s life narratives play an important role to bring into focus the gender issue within Dalit literature.

Karan Singh in *Dalitism and Feminism: Locating Woman in Dalit Literature* (2011) observes, “Though asserting bondage with their dalit self, they are not swayed by it to forget another equally important factor in their debasement – their female self” (220). Dalit women’s life narratives offer a critical appraisal of Dalit women’s position in the society. Like their male counterparts, Dalit women’s life narratives not only talk about the caste issues but also about the gender oppression both within the home and outside in the community.

Surekha Nelavala in her article “Inclusivity and Distinctions: The Future of Dalit Biblical Studies” (2010) states that “Dalit women’s autobiographies provide dissident spaces within the literary public in which they can speak out against untouchability and patriarchy. Personal narratives of the marginalized also serve as sociocultural records of their community as well as the literary forms of social protest….Exposing continuous untouchability unites everyone who has similar experiences and those who identify with such experiences of exclusion, insult, or discrimination” (106). Dalit women’s narratives act as space for dissent against untouchability and patriarchy as well as become the collective voice of the marginalized who suffer exclusion, humiliation and discrimination.

In Urmila Pawar’s opinion (2011), Dalit women’s writings:

…expose the flaws in dalit masculinity and patriarchy. At the same time, their extremely realistic descriptions of rituals, exorcism and other
domestic practices offer a rich material to the anthropologist. These experiences also provide an insight into the various kinds of oppression which controlled them, shaped their lives and finally compelled them to resist. The act of writing expresses this resistance. (Jain)

Dalit women’s life narratives exhibit Dalit women’s experiences which give insight into the various kinds of oppression which suppress Dalit women. At the same time, these experiences also become a force which pressurizes Dalit women to resist the atrocities. The act of articulation of suffering is an act of revolt.

Dr. Bijender Singh in the Introduction to Dalit Women’s Autobiographies: A Critical Appraisal (2016), analyses that Dalit women’s life narratives “are the protest against ‘Dalit Patriarchy and ‘social patriarchy’” (20). Through their life stories, Dalit women voice their double victimization because of patriarchal oppression within the community as well as in the society at large.

Susie K. Tharu and K. Lalita in their edited book Women Writing in India 600 B.C. to the Present (1993) observe that The Prison We Broke:

…concentrates on the period before Independence, and, in distinct contrast to earlier women’s autobiographies (such as those by Lakshmibai Tilak, Ramabai Ranade, and Anandibai Karve) that focus on writers’ marriages and their husbands, Baby Kamble deals with life of her people. (307)

The Prison We Broke differs from the mainstream female life narratives as it exclusively focuses on Dalits’ issues: the issues on which a Dalit woman identifies herself with her male counterpart.

Maya Pandit in her Introduction to The Weave of My Life (2008) comments:

Urmila Pawar’s memoir represents the struggle of a dalit woman who has travelled on a long journey from a small town to a huge metropolis, and became one of its leading intellectuals and writers. She has tried to make values like justice, equality, freedom, rationality, citizenship and democracy an integral part of her dalit feminist utopia. This is what sets The Weave of My Life apart from all other books written in the tradition of the feminist, radical and dalit struggles. (xxix)
The Weave of My Life reflects Urmila Pawar’s experience of the difficulties of being a woman and Dalit besides it differs from other life narratives as it forms equality, freedom and fraternity as an integral part of her Dalit feminist critique.

Sushama Deshpande, who has been close to Urmila Pawar since 1980s through Maitrini (a women’s organization), remarks:

In Aaydan, Urmila delicately navigates her readers through her long journey from the harsh landscape of the Konkan region to Mumbai—first as a Mahar and later as a woman—as she challenged the conventions of both caste and gender to emerge as an activist and a strong literary voice. (qtd. in Nagpaul)

The Weave of My Life demonstrates how after her experience of both casteism and patriarchy, Urmila Pawar emerges as a strong activist and literary voice. She further states that the vigour of Urmila Pawar’s writing “lies in the way her stories use the mundane, everyday acts and objects to remind the reader of the deep roots of caste discrimination and patriarchy” (Nagpaul).

Lakshmi Holmstrom in her note to the second edition (2011) of Karukku writes:

Karukku was written out of a specific experience, the experience of a Tamil Dalit Christian woman. Yet it has universality at its core which questions all oppressions, disturbs all complacencies, and, reaching out, empowers 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. (Translator’s Note xiv)

Karukku describes the experience of a Tamil Dalit Christian woman but it is universal in nature as it questions all sorts of oppression and injustice.

Anushiya Sivanarayan in her article “Translation and Globalization: Tamil Dalit Literature and Bama’s Karukku” (2009) writes: “THE 1992 NOVEL KARUKKU by the Tamil writer Bama is written in autobiographical style and describes how the female narrator comes to understand the various dimensions of her Dalit identity”(35). Karukku is a life narrative of a woman who gradually comes to the realization of herself as a Dalit.
Raj Gautaman in his article “‘Oivaanga t vaiyillai’ (We don’t need haloes)” (1995) points out:

…it is the function of Dalit writing to awaken in every reader a consciousness of the oppressed Dalit and to share in the Dalit experience as if it were their own. (*Karukku*, he says, is a singular example of a piece of writing which achieves this). (Holmstrom, Introduction xix)

Bama has a purpose behind writing about herself, her dreams, her aspirations and her desires, that is to raise the consciousness of Dalits, especially women against injustice.

M.S.S. Pandian in his article “On a Dalit Woman’s Testimonio” (1998) admits that *Karukku* is the collective voice of the oppressed community. Bama:

…verbalizes her own life story, depletes rather effortlessly the autobiographical ‘I’, an outcome of bourgeois individualism, and displaces it with the collectivity of the dalit community. Her story, to put it differently, refuses to be her own but that of others too. (132)

Pramod K. Nayar in *Writing Wrongs: The Cultural Construction of Human Rights in India* (2012) states: “*Karukku* is a powerful critique of Indian civil society itself: the educational system, the church and the bureaucracy and highlights the complicity between class and caste in post-independence India” (84). *Karukku* is a critique of the society which privileges only few and pushes the others to the periphery.

M. Srinivasan in his review (2001) of *Viramma: Life of an untouchable* states that *Viramma: Life of an untouchable* gives an insight into the life of a Dalit woman:

*Viramma: Life of an untouchable* is an oral history, told by Viramma herself, a Pariah…woman, singer, mother, midwife and agricultural labourer in Tamil Nadu, southern India. It is an insight into the joys and struggles of her life without the filter of academic theory….Through a single woman’s eyes, we see a world of births, deaths, markets, poverty, theatre, masters and slaves and husbands and wives, told with the passion and nuance of one who has lived the experience rather than mere observations and theories. The work is a personal story of how one woman experiences the cross-cutting influences of caste, class, rural life, gender, myth, policies and religion. (103)

Moreover, Geetha Ramanathan in *Locating Gender in Modernism: The Outsider Female* (2012) remarks that *Viramma: Life of an untouchable* is a call for the social change: “The
very nature of Viramma’s experience calls for a change in the inhuman relations between Dalits and people with caste” (50).

Neelam Srivastava in her article “Postcolonial Translation: The Case of South Asia” (2006) writes:

…the success of “A Life Less Ordinary” was partly due to the unusual circumstances of its writing. The author was an uneducated domestic worker who had been encouraged by her employer to put pen to paper and write the story of her life. (75)

*A Life Less Ordinary* offers the life journey of a woman who overcame poverty, hardship and violence to make a name for herself as a writer.

Vida Rahiminezhad in her article “Reading of “A Life Less Ordinary” as a testimonio” states, “To me A Life Less Ordinary is a political gender project which tries to show the injustice the women in Baby’s community have to endure” (80).

Lalit Surjan in his article “Alo-Andhari: The Story of Baby Haldar” (2003) confirms: “This is a truthful tale of the lives of millions of ordinary Indian women. It has been authored by an unknown woman, one among millions, named Baby Halder, who barely managed to study upto the eighth grade” (qtd. in “Praise for,” ii). Amelia Gentleman in her article “In India, a Maid Becomes an Unlikely Literary Star” (2006) in *The New York Times* substantiates Lalit Surjan’s comments: “It provides a fascinating insight into an unfamiliar side of Indian life that is not usually the focus of the novelist’s attention” (qtd. in “Praise for,” ii).

Anaghe Tambe in the article “Different issues/ different Voices: Organization of women in Prostitution in India” (2008) says: “... Nalini Jameela rejects the stereotypical and stigmatized description of prostitution significantly, not to claim respectability, but rather to locate women like her in a community of ‘ordinary’ labouring poor women” (82).

Jaya Jaitly in her review of *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* “Her Own code” (2007) published in *Outlook* magazine states:
Her voice is simply that of a human being who can shed every bit of hypocrisy as only the very poor can, for it is only those who have nothing to lose who can freely choose to do whatever is necessary to survive. Her account challenges intellectuals, feminists, activists and various self-appointed moralists, and their bondage to middle-class predicaments…. (Jaitly)

*The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* at once throws a challenge at society’s double standards – harsh on prostitutes and soft on the clients, insensitive to weak and receptive to strong.

Malsawmi Jacob in her review (2009) of *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* appreciates it as a story of courage and strength of a lower caste ordinary woman:

One thing that comes across through the narration is the strength of the author’s personality….In the midst of harsh and depressing circumstances, however, she never lost courage. All this is described in a plain, matter of fact way, with never a whining note. (2)

The review of literature underscores that these Dalit women writers have been extensively studied in individual capacity. However, no collective, full length study of these writers’ narratives has been undertaken as such this thesis proposes to study these life narratives not only as collective voice of the sufferers but also as distinctive voice of the sufferer.

Introduction discusses the concept of Dalit, ‘subaltern’ and Dalit women’s experience of marginalization because of gender, caste and class. It highlights Dalit women’s literature, Dalit women’s life narratives and introduces the Dalit women’s life narratives taken up for study in this thesis along with the literary survey of scholarship of their life accounts. Introduction concludes with the synoptic view of the three chapters and Conclusion.

Chapter I titled “Emerging from the Shadows” deals with the Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* in Section I and Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life* in Section II. The word ‘shadow’ in the context of Dalit women, in this chapter, refers to their inferior position in the caste pyramid. In this chapter, Paulo Friere’s concept of “conscientization” is used in context of Dalit women’s emancipation from repression.
Section I of Chapter I analyzes Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke*. Baby Kamble seeks her individual identity within the collective identity of Mahar women. The narration deals with Baby Kamble’s memories of her family, *Maharwada*, Mahar customs, superstitions, illiteracy, poverty, hunger, experiences of discrimination, exploitation, marginalization and violence. Baby Kamble in her life narrative makes use of collective memory and collective lived experience to narrate her story as Mahar woman. The memories set the narration of the life narrative. Mahar women suffer exploitation not only from the upper caste people but also suffer oppression within the family from the male members. The theme of poverty, hunger, nakedness, toil, exploitation, reproduction, caste, dress code, space, domestic violence and awakening form the core of her life narrative. Baby Kamble in her life narrative draws the resilience and strength of Mahar women and depicts how Mahar women become the agents of change in their community.

Section II of Chapter I scrutinizes Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs*. The narration covers the life journey of Urmila Pawar from her childhood to an adult woman. The life narrative focuses on the issues like poverty, caste injustices and humiliation, domestic violence, sexual harassment, marginalization of Dalit women within the community as well as in the society at large, female sexuality, menstruation, dress code, pain of mother as well as mother-daughter relationship. *The Weave of My Life* reveals the awakening, awareness and exploration of Urmila Pawar’s individual self. Her awareness about herself and social system helped her to be strong and true to herself in spite of opposition from the society as well as from the family. She emerged as an active agent to gain her identity as an individual, as writer and as dignified Mahar woman.

Chapter II titled “Resistance to Resurrection” examines Bama’s *Karukku* in Section I and Viramma’s *Viramma: Life of an untouchable* in Section II. In this chapter Barbara Harlow’s concept of ‘Resistance Literature’ and the views of the critics like Vemula Elliah, Malashri Lal and Sukrita Paul Kumar, Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash are employed to observe how resistance plays a significant role in the lives of Dalit women and how articulation helps them to resurrect their ‘self.’
Section I of this chapter is devoted to Bama’s Karukku. Bama had seen discrimination and experienced humiliation of untouchability and therefore decided to become a nun in order to help marginalized people. However, in the convent she found a wide gap exists between preaching and action. The focus in this section is on poverty, hunger, untouchability, caste humiliation and discrimination in the schools as well as in the convent, exploitation of Dalit women’s labour at home as well as outside the home by the upper caste people and the importance of education as key to resistance, to injustice and resurrection of one’s self. Karukku is not simply the narration of life story but it is used as a means of self-assertion, self-resurrection and resistance against the exploitative social structure which helped her to create her identity and space within literary as well as social sphere.

Section II studies the life narrative Viramma: Life of an untouchable which portrays the life of a rural Pariah woman, Viramma. The individual life story gives an insight into the lives of the rural Dalit women. Viramma in her life narrative highlights two types of resistance. One type of resistance is confrontation with the social structure which chains women and the other type of resistance is against caste system. The themes analysed in this section are poverty, hunger, exploitation of Dalit women’s labour and bodies within the four walls of the house as well as outside the home by the upper caste people; menstruation, reproduction, motherhood, superstitions, and Dalit female sexuality. Illiterate and unaware of the means to justice, she resists passively. Viramma through articulation of her sufferings, exhibits resistance to the social structure responsible for Pariah women’s subjugation and also makes effort not only to resurrect the dignity of the crushed Pariah women collectively but also to recover her own distinctive individual voice.

Chapter III titled “The Question of (Re)presentation” scrutinizes Baby Halder’s A Life Less Ordinary in Section I and Nalini Jameela’s The Autobiography of a Sex Worker in Section II. In this chapter the concept of re-presentation and representation and the views of Postcolonial feminists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty are used in context of Dalit women.
Section I deals with Baby Halder, the protagonist of *A Life Less Ordinary*, who represents and re-presents her individual self as well as the oppressed lives of the women of her community. Her life narrative registers her memories of distressed childhood, poverty and domestic violence at the hands of her father as well as her husband. Her experience as a domestic worker forms the hub of her life narrative. Her life narrative traces her life journey from a passive woman to a domestic worker and then to a writer and an agency.

In Section II the focus is on Nalini Jameela’s life experiences as narrated in *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*. Nalini Jameela through her life narrative attempts to re-present and represent the marginalized lives of sex workers. The life narrative traces her life journey from disturbing childhood to a labourer to sex worker and then to an activist and an author. The narrative voices the distress and sufferings of sex workers who do not have space even at the periphery of the social structure. Her life narrative is an attempt to represent and re-present the social, cultural and economical obstacles which force Dalit women to opt for stigmatized sex work.

Conclusion seeks to recapitulate the observations and arguments made in the preceding chapters. The Conclusion is followed by Glossary. The debt to literary scholarship consulted is duly acknowledged in the Bibliography.