Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines the word “presentation” as “the act of showing something” (def. 1) or “the way in which something is offered, shown, explained, etc. to others” (def. 2). The word “re-presentation” is described as “making present again” (Krippendoff 143), that is the way in which something is shown or explained or presented again. The word “represent” is “to be a member of a group of people and act or speak on their behalf at an event, a meeting, etc.” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary def. 1), and “to be an example or expression of something” (def. 4) or “to be a symbol of something” (def. 5). Hence, the term ‘representation’ is defined as the way in which:

We assess whether a painting is a good likeness of something we know. We ask whether a lawyer is representing her client adequately. We judge whether written account of a meeting accurately reflects what was said. A member of parliament is expected to speak in the name of his or her constituency. We wonder whether a sample of subjects is a statistically adequate representation of the population of interest. (Krippendoff 143)

In the essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak talks about “Two senses of representation” which “run together: representation as ‘speaking for’, as in politics, and representation as ‘re-presentation’, as in art or philosophy” (79). Hence, re-presentation means to re-present something with a new perspective and representation means representing and speaking for a group of which she/he is a member. Dalit women through their life narratives are re-presenting their lives, their experiences, their aspirations, their distress, their sufferings and themselves as individuals. Dalit women, perceived as weak and helpless, by articulating their life stories have made an attempt to re-present themselves not as weak and defenseless victims but as strong and courageous individuals who not only rise up against injustice but also become the source of inspiration/awareness for the marginalized women. The individual experiences of these Dalit women writers are different, therefore, they cannot represent each and every Dalit women individually: “This voice is not representative of all Dalit women.” However, their experiences as Dalit women stand for the collective experiences of their community. M. Swami Margret confesses “her voice is important because it is the voice of a socially denigrated category, suppressed and silenced” (Anita Ghosh 53). Hence, a Dalit woman’s voice represents the voice of an oppressed community of Dalit women.
Dalit women can speak about and for themselves. Dalit women by giving voice to their experiences attempt to shatter the structures and institutions of oppression which subjugate them. Their articulation becomes “a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself.” The articulation not only leads to the formation of “self-identity” but also “to the creation of a discursive space where (self-) knowledge is produced” (Mohanty 78) by and for marginalized women.

This chapter critiques Baby Halder’s *A Life Less Ordinary* in Section I and Nalini Jameela’s *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* in Section II to show how these ordinary Dalit women narrators have used their life narratives to re-present and re-write the history of a socially denigrated category (Dalit women) which is suppressed and hushed and also how Dalit women’s narratives at times become the collective voice of Dalit women representing their oppression and degradation.

It is “not just rags to riches, but anonymity to fame.” Baby Halder’s *A Life Less Ordinary* makes “the unseen visible, the unheard voice heard” (Rangachari). *A Life Less Ordinary* represents Baby Halder’s individual life experiences and also gives representation to Dalit women’s experiences. It re-presents her individual self as well as the oppressed lives of the women of her community. Her life narrative registers her memories of distressing childhood, poverty, her bewilderment at being abandoned by her mother Ganga when she was a child, her determination to study which was curbed by unfavourable circumstances, the love-hate relationship with her father Upendranath Halder, friction with her stepmother, torture by her husband, her escape impelled by the resolve to give a better life to her children, her experiences as a domestic worker, her fascination with books that was only waiting to be revived, and the re-presentation and the new beginning of her life as a writer. It was her desire to fill the void left by her incomplete schooling that prompted her to read and then write her life narrative *A Life Less Ordinary*. The most remarkable characteristic of Baby Halder’s life narrative is “her self-portrait: her striking metamorphosis over these few pages from an unreflecting, passive woman, unquestioningly submitting to what life dealt out to her, into a writer capable of graphically evoking all the searing, suppressed memories that made up her
The title of the life narrative *A Life Less Ordinary* is itself pinpointing to a marginalized woman’s extraordinary life journey, that is less ordinary.

Anne Frank wrote her diary with the hope to reveal everything about her ‘self’ in it as she felt she had never truly been able to open her heart to anyone: “I hope I will be able to confide everything to you, as I have never been able to confide in anyone, and I hope you will be a great source of comfort and support” (9). Similarly, Baby Halder also wrote her life narrative to pour out her feelings, her thoughts, her life experiences and her agony which she never disclosed to anyone:

> When I wrote, I felt like I was talking to someone, and after writing I would feel lighter, as if I had taken some sort of revenge against my father, who never took care of me as a father should, and against my husband….I never thought that other people might be interested in reading my story. (Baby Halder qtd. in Gentleman)

Her life narrative became a friend to her with whom she shared her painful memories and distress. It became her agency to speak back to the social structures responsible for her victimization. *A Life Less Ordinary* is neither divided into chapters nor sections. The narration starts with Baby Halder’s distressing childhood and concludes with her becoming a writer.

Baby Halder in her life narrative *A Life Less Ordinary* reveals her distressing childhood because of poverty, hunger, violence and no schooling. It opens with Baby Halder’s childhood memories in Jammu and Kashmir where her father, serving in the Indian army, was posted. At that time she was four years old living with her parents, brothers and sister. After sometime the family moved to Murshidabad in West Bengal. Thereafter, her father was transferred to Dalhousie and the family moved with him. Baby Halder rejoiced this period of her life spent with her parents and siblings in the serenity of Dalhousie:

> Dalhousie reminded me a lot of Jammu and Kashmir. Snow would fall from the sky, the snowflakes swirling around like a swarm of bees, and settle gently on the ground. And when it rained, it was impossible to leave the house, so we would just play inside, or we’d watch the rain falling from our windows. We loved Dalhousie and we stayed there for a quite a long time. We’d go out walking every day. We were so happy, just looking at all the flowers on the hillsides. We played all sorts of games
among the flowers, and sometimes, a rainbow, would arch across the mountains, filling my heart with joy. (*A Life Less Ordinary* 1)

Through the serene description of the landscape, Baby Halder replicates the happy memories of childhood in Dalhousie. According to Carolyn Kay Steedman, “We all return to memories and dreams like this, again and again; the story we tell of our own life is reshaped around them” (243). The scenic beauty fed her emotions and added colour in her child life. The description of snow flakes, rain, flowers is the reflection of the happy state of Baby Halder’s childhood.

However, this happiness was short-lived. On their return to “Murshidabad again” (*LLO* 1) her miseries started when her mother Ganga because of the irresponsible behaviour of her father Upendranath Halder, left the house along with the youngest son leaving behind Baby Halder and the other children. To avoid the responsibility of a growing daughter in the absence of mother, Baby Halder’s father married off her elder sister Sushila who was just fifteen: “…so that no one would have anything left to say” (3). After her mother’s departure, Sushila became a victim to her father’s aggression: “If Ma had not gone, we wouldn’t have had to shoulder this burden” (4). Left alone Baby Halder never missed going to the school:

> I loved school as much as I hated home. I never wanted to go home—there was no one there who appreciated my work in the same way as my teachers at school, so there was no incentive for me to go back. The days when there was no school stretched out forever, and I missed Ma and Didi terribly, so whenever I got the chance, I’d run off to play with my friends.

(4)

The school gave her relief from the gloomy ambiance of the home, the torturous father and the sad memories of her mother and sister.

Dalit girls often suffer “from verbal and physical abuse at the hands of their fathers and brothers” (Tomar 1). In *A Life Less Ordinary* Baby Halder brings into fore two types of space: one is private and the other is public. The private space is represented by home and the public space is represented by society. She talks about the ‘breathing space’ provided to Dalit girls in the private space. Through her childhood memories Baby Halder re-presents and represents the anguish and suffering of Dalit girls who imbibe
marginalized identity within the home and are the victims of domestic violence at the hands of their male family members. Baby Halder’s childhood was muddled with poverty, violence and hunger. Baby Halder narrates that often there was nothing to eat at home. Therefore, she went hungry to school. One day, her friend came to fetch her to school. When her friend told her to eat something before leaving for school, she cried: “there was nothing in the house to eat” (*LLO* 4). Her father heard this. When she returned from school he gave her a sound beating “so badly that it was three days before I could get up and many more before I felt able to go back to school again” (5). Her father’s beating her was an act of vengeance which he blurted out on her as his male-ego was hurt. Baby Halder’s utterance that there was nothing to eat in the house demonstrated her father was not capable of providing for his family which injured his ego.

Caroline McGee reports a wide range of effects of domestic violence on the children which include “fear, powerlessness, depression or sadness, impaired social relations, impacts on the child’s identity, effects on educational achievement and anger, very often displayed as aggressive behaviour. The child’s relationship with the father or father figure is also clearly affected…” (69). Baby Halder drifted away from her father:

Baba did not allow me to wear bangles; I wasn’t allowed to talk to anyone, to play with anyone, and often not even allowed out of the house. I was so scared of being beaten that I would look for opportunities to go out and play only when I knew he was not around to stop me. I was only eleven or twelve years old at time, and I used to think that no one could be as unfortunate as me. I used to think that only I knew what it means to lose a mother. Sometimes when I thought about Ma, I would think that if it had been Baba who had left instead of her, perhaps things would not have been so bad. After all, what had Baba given us, except fear? (*LLO* 12)

She never told her father when she fell sick. Her only solace was to clutch “the ten paisa coin Ma had pressed into my palm the day she left and every time I saw it I remembered Ma” (8). The ten paisa coin was the only memory of her mother which she always kept safe with her. Her father’s second marriage became another catastrophe in her life. The stepmother never fed the children on time and often used to beat them without any reason. She also poisoned her husband’s ears against the children to pave the way for severe thrashing.
Her father was without love and concern for the children: “He did not bother to buy us books and notebooks, but we managed somehow….I don’t quite know how Baba spent the money he earned, but I do know that he used to drink, and that this had become much worse after my real Ma left” (6). As a result, their studies suffered. After some time, he left for Dhanbad in search of job and after several months returned to take the children and his second wife along with him. From Dhanbad her father moved to Durgapur leaving the children with a friend. Without parents, without love and happiness, the children suffered:

On Puja night, everyone wore new, colourful clothes to celebrate and there was a general atmosphere of festivity. But not for us. My brother and I sat on our doorstep and watched all this and we cried. (6)

Baby Halder’s childhood was devoid of care and joy: “…the child for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding” (Couture 86). But Baby Halder never got her family’s care, love and understanding and this bitter memory became a part of her ‘self’. Sheela Reddy in the Foreword to A Life Less Ordinary comments:

She [Baby Halder] remembers the games she liked to play at school, an older brother who flees from home, a stepmother who ill-treats them, her father going away to find a new job in Dhanbad. And then, with a child’s lack of discrimination, we have her suddenly sitting on their doorstep with a younger brother, weeping because they don’t have new clothes for Durga Puja. It is as if, given a pen and paper and asked to write about her life, Baby is assiduously extracting, with a surgeon’s precision and professional lack of sentiment, all the hurts and traumas that made up her childhood. (ix)

The trauma and loneliness suffered during childhood got engraved in Baby Halder’s mind: “Childhood trauma may be accompanied by…a number of changes….These changes last” (Terr 11).

A Life Less Ordinary recounts Baby Halder’s miseries and hurts she suffered as a Dalit girl in the family space. She began to remain quiet and drifted away from people. After sometime her father left his second wife and married for the third time. He told the children: “…Ma had returned and it made us so happy.” He took them to Durgapur where
“we found that the woman Baba was calling our mother was another mother altogether. I said to my brother, “How much more do you think we will have to bear?”...” Baby Halder was fed up with her father’s lies, she longed for her mother. Even after her father’s third marriage, home environment did not improve for Baby Halder: “Baba would not let our third mother out of the house: she wasn’t even allowed to go to the tap to fetch water. If water was needed, we were sent out for it” (LLO 7). Whenever Baby Halder went to her Jetha or Pishi ma’s house to study, her father brought her back home on one pretext or the other: “…the existing position of girl’s education in our country even in this first stage leaves much to be desired both from the quantity as well as the quality point of view” (Mazumdar 28). The girl’s education in Indian society is considered as an unimportant affair. Baby Halder kept wondering but:

...remembered the one thing for which her presence was essential and it made her smile. Baby’s stepmother kept her head covered night and day and she would never go out into the fields alone to relieve herself. Baba would not let her and it was Baby’s job to accompany her into the fields! I’m embarrassed to even talk about it, but whatever it was, they had decided that they wanted to take Baby back and one day, they came to Pishi-ma’s house and did just that. (LLO 29)

Baby Halder’s father was an eccentric person. His negligence towards his familial duties and emotional stress made Baby Halder’s mother to leave the house. He was also unable to get along with his second wife. He also made his third wife’s life miserable by imprisoning her in the house due to his suspicious nature. He failed to realize the value of education and, hence created hurdles for Baby Halder. She was forced to escort her stepmother in the fields for call of nature at the cost of her studies. The childhood memories torment Baby Halder: “…back in the past, back in the lost time…the only point lies in interpretation. The past is re-used through the agency of social information, and that interpretation of it can only be made with what people know of a social world and their place” (Steedman 243). In her life narrative she creates her space, which is denied to her by the social system, where she ponders over her past—as to how, why and for whose fault she suffered—to understand her present.

Baby Halder’s studies were abruptly stopped: “…thought of only two things: whether I was asleep or awake, my thoughts would constantly turn to my studies and my
mother.” As a result of this, she went into depression. Her father took her to the hospital but the doctors were unable to diagnose the reason behind her illness until she told another doctor: “…everything that had been worrying me and he was very angry with Baba, and scolded him” (LLO 9). A Life Less Ordinary highlights the mental harassment suffered by a Dalit girl on the onset of puberty: “…girls feel embarrassment and shame not because menstruation is shameful but because our society has a negative attitude toward menstruation. Many people in our culture are uncomfortable about bodies, and women’s bodies in particular. Too many girls and women suffer needlessly because of these attitudes” (Bell 41). The social attitude is that woman’s body is something which needs to remain concealed as a result puberty and menstruation is less discussed. Baby Halder got aware of her sexuality when at the age of “eleven or twelve” (LLO 12), she had her first menstruation:

One day, while I was still in hospital, I woke in the morning to find my bedsheets wet with blood. I was frightened and I began to cry. The nurse heard me and came to find out what was wrong, but I was so scared I could not say anything to her. But then she noticed the sheet and asked me if anything like this had happened to me before. I said no, and she understood the reason for my fear. A few people had collected there and they were smiling. Patients in the other beds tried to explain to me that there was nothing to worry about, that this happens when girls grow up. (9-10)

The onset of puberty further added to her miseries. At home everybody’s behaviour towards her changed. Their looks were different, especially of her father which made her uncomfortable:

When my new Ma saw me, I thought she looked a little concerned. I went in for a bath and when I had finished I saw her looking at my bloodstained clothes. I told her what had happened in the hospital and then I thought she was telling Baba something—he looked a bit worried too although he did not say anything. In fact, every time I looked at him, it seemed that he was thinking about me, but I did not have the courage to ask what was on his mind….Baba’s behaviour had changed too. (10)

The changed gaze made her anxious. She was perplexed and worried as her father:

…no longer scolded me and if I did anything wrong or made any mistakes, he would simply say: “You’re not a child anymore. You should be more
“careful.” He told me so often that I was no longer a child that I began to wonder if perhaps I had grown up after all. Slowly I began to see signs that told me this indeed was so. One day I was sitting on the chowki, reading aloud, when I suddenly looked up and saw Baba watching me intently. He was listening carefully to what I was reading. (10)

The prevalent belief in society that a grown up girl needs to be protected, kept under surveillance as she is the honour of the family and the sooner she is married off is better further added to the desolation of Baby Halder. In the familial space she was uncared for and in the public space she felt harassed. The boys in the neighbourhood started paying her attention: “I think the boy who lived in the hotel behind our house had also begun to think I was now grown up. Every time I sat down to read in the room, I would find him watching outside, he would come and stand there and watch me.” This was another worry for her. She was afraid if her father came to know about it “he’ll beat me up” (11). Baby Halder in despair longed for her mother’s presence: “I used to think if only I could have her love and support, my fear of Baba would be manageable.” (12).

With no one around her to guide/aware her regarding the acceptance of her bodily changes, Baby Halder in A Life Less Ordinary re-presents and represents the anxiety of the young girls at puberty when they begin to explore their marginal position in the society as they become aware of their bodies and taboos attached to them. Her blossoming from a girl to woman to which the society was signifier: “You’re not a child anymore” (10) was not acceptable to her: “…female is meant to define and confine the self in our symbolic order” (Stanton 138) as everyone around victimized her transformation by curtailing the carefreeness of the childhood.

A growing daughter poses a challenge to the family. However, the situation becomes grim when her mother begins to doubt the relationship between the daughter and her father:

…her daughter’s connection with her father as a threat to her own relationship with her spouse. She may resort to criticizing or putting her mate down to her daughter. She may even attempt to limit the contact between her daughter and husband….The tension and hostility will likely escalate, with unhappy consequences for the marital relationship, as well as the mother/daughter relationship. (Chosak)
A Life Less Ordinary re-presents and represents the anxiety of a Dalit girl through Baby Halder whom her stepmother saw as her rival for her husband’s attention and care. Baby Halder looks back nostalgically to the day when her father was brooding alone in the dark. She asked him: “What’s wrong Baba?” He started to say something and then stopped, “Nothing. Nothing at all,” he said and he drew me gently towards him.” Her stepmother saw them: “After that night, Baba and Ma had many fights about me—so many that the whole house became full of tension, and I heard them say that the sooner I was married off, the better. Because of the tense atmosphere at home, Baba began to keep his distance from me and I likewise avoided him” (LLO 25). The tension escalated in the family making Baby Halder ponder:

Did my stepmother really think that I, a twelve-year-old child, could have such an abnormal relationship with her father, that his wife needed to be worried that?…that made things extremely difficult for me. I was so embarrassed by the whole thing that I found it difficult even to talk to the neighbours….I felt that, like my own mother, I should also leave home and go away. But then I would ask myself, where would I go? I had no place to call my own. (25)

Baby Halder’s stepmother was unable to develop a cordial relationship with her stepdaughter. She, therefore, felt threatened by Baby Halder’s affection for her father. Her regular fights and doubts regarding father-daughter relationship forced him to ignore his daughter:

…like a thorn in his flesh. The smallest things would irritate him, and somehow this just destroyed my confidence. I began to wonder and worry whether others too found me irritating….Every time I heard them complain about me, or about how they could get rid of me, I would go out of the house and cry. (25-26)

Her stepmother’s suspicion and her father’s annoyance left Baby Halder dejected. She suffered further alienation. Later, her uncaring father married her off, at the age of twelve, without verifying much about the groom: “…I began to realize that Baba now wanted to be free of me: he had sent me away and that was that. He no longer wanted to be burdened with my problems” (41). Baby Halder sighs:

Poor Baby! What else could one say of her? Imagine a childhood so brief, so ephemeral, that you could sit down and the whole thing could unravel
in front of you in barely half an hour! And yet her childhood fascinates Baby. Perhaps everyone is fascinated by the things they’ve been deprived of, the things they long for. Baby remembers her childhood, she savours every moment of it, she licks it just as a cow would her calf, tasting every part. (28)

Baby Halder longed for the joys of life: “All children experience a first loss, a first exclusion; lives shape themselves around this sense of being cut off and denied” (Steedman 243) which she was deprived of in her childhood.

Baby Halder’s marriage to Shankar, who was fourteen years older than her: “I was a little over twelve years old and he was twenty six!” (LLO 30) opened another phase of cruelty in her unhappy life: “…this was the beginning of her days of grief and pain, little did she know what the future held for her” (34). Baby Halder’s marriage at the age of twelve and her elder sister Sushila’s marriage at tender age substantiate that the implementation of law is weak in India: “…child marriage was outlawed in 1929, under Indian law…in the British colonial times, the legal minimum age of marriage was set at 15 for girls and 18 for boys…after India gained its independence from the colonial rule, particularly in 1978…the marriage age was raised by 3 years each for men and women” (Chandrashekhar 28). To Baby Halder marriage meant “feast” (LLO 30); marriage was an imposition on her by the society. For Baby Halder consummation of marriage was a harrowing experience, a beastly show of male power over female:

…he caught hold of me and pulled me roughly towards him. He put his hand on my breast…began to press his body against mine. I started to cry out of fear. But then, I thought, what’s the point? I’ll just wake everyone by shouting like this, so I shut my eyes and my mouth tightly and let him do what he wanted. I just endured everything. (37)

*A Life Less Ordinary* represents and re-presents the violation and “the experiences of the female body” (Stanton 137) in the private space: “One of the biggest lacunae is the non-criminalization of marital rape” (Datta 27). The institution of marriage endows husband the right on his wife’s body whereas for the wife it bestows “unfortunate silence” (McKay 104). A woman is looked upon as a commodity, a plaything, a dummy on whom a man can force himself as and when he desires for his pleasure without her consent: “The material and social basis for this domination are, however, quite
clear….Unlike women to whom marriage is the only legitimate avenue to companionship and sexual intimacy, for men, marriage is a social arrangement that services their sexual and emotional needs, without actually containing them” (Dinnerstein and Kakar qtd. in V. Geetha, *Gender* 130). Baby Halder, for Shankar, was just an object to exploit as per his desire.

Baby Halder was “not even fourteen years old” (*LLO* 55) when she gave birth to her first child whereas it is a well established fact and widely propagated by the government and media that: “…no girl should become pregnant before the age of 18 because she is not physically ready to bear children. Babies of mothers younger than 18…are more likely to die….The risk to the young mother’s own health is also greater” (R. Kumar and M. Kumar, *Childhood* 257). She critically survived her first delivery but her husband did not care to be with her at this significant time. Women “have no right to decide whether they want to be mothers, when they want to be, the number of children they want to have and so on and so forth. Male dominated institutions like…state also lay down rules regarding women’s reproductive capacity” (Jha 123). It is the man who decides the number of children but it is not his obligation to accompany his wife to the hospital at the time of delivery. Baby Halder in the hospital suffered alone:

…crying and screaming…she was put on a table and her arms and legs were tied….The doctor put her on saline drip and the doctor pronounced that she was in a bad state….The doctor caught hold of the baby and pulled it out….The passage had ruptured and had to be stitched up and the nurse brought what seemed like frightening-looking scissors and knives to the doctor. Fearfully, Baby asked the aayh, “What is he going to do with all that? I am perfectly all right now.”….Once he was finished, he told the aayah, that she could clean up. Oh God, there was so much blood—buckets full of it! Can one still have any strength after losing so much blood?” (*LLO* 55-56)

Baby Halder unaware of the intricacies of marital life and motherhood was shocked to see her blood at the time of delivery.

Baby Halder due to lack of nutritious diet, before and after delivery, became weak and her milk began to dry up. Her baby was barely a month old. The child would cry out of hunger: “I mentioned this to the child’s father but for several days, he completely ignored me. Then one day, I don’t know what came into his head, but he went out and
came back with a tin of milk powder” (61-62). Shankar’s insensitive attitude towards Baby Halder and infant’s needs further tormented her as it reminded her of her own suffering as a child in her parental home. Shankar never gave her money to run the household, not even for the education of the children or for their daily expenses. She remained helpless for little things:

My husband never gave any money to me. I had to ask him for each and every little thing I needed. He would decide whether he wanted to give me money or not. All kinds of vendors would come into our neighbourhood to sell things and I felt very bad when I saw all the other girls buying from them. Even when there was shopping to be done at the market, he would go himself. (50)

Just like her father, he never liked her going out of the house, meeting people or purchasing anything for herself:

…one day, Shashti’s mother called me to their house. When I arrived there, I realized that my husband had followed me. He did not wait to ask anyone anything. Silently, he picked up a stone from the ground and hit me on the head with it. My forehead split apart, and blood gushed out….All I asked my husband was what I had done to be beaten like this. The words were barely out of my mouth when he picked up a sturdy piece of wood and began hitting me on my back. (84)

Shankar, a weird man, wanted to control Baby Halder’s movement outside the home as the external world is the source of awareness of which women have been deprived of so as to make them dependent on men which leads to their exploitation and suffering: “Staying away from public places such as bazaars or movie theaters, not venturing outside the home unless accompanied, and not participating in the labor force are some other means of maintaining seclusion” (Desai and Temsah).

Communication between husband and wife is a prerequisite for a healthy marital relationship: “Husbands who do not communicate with their wives are those that consider their wives inferior…” (Goodlight 30). Shankar never talked to her lovingly. He left the house in the morning and returned in the evening: “We hardly spoke to each other” (LLO 49). Her husband took delight in ill-treating her. He even took away the child from her, and did not allow her to see her own son for months. Baby Halder suffered both emotional violence and physical violence in her marital life. During her second
pregnancy, he hit her so hard with a stick that she had a miscarriage: “You have a child in your womb, but it will not survive. Sachin-da will give you some medicine: it will take around five minutes to work.” Suddenly, I felt as if something inside me was slipping out of my body” (86). After this incident, she decided not to return to her husband: “I had nowhere to go—I did not want to go back to him…” (88). But her father took her to “the panchayat house” and in front of “Five elders” warned Shankar: “See to it now that my daughter is not forced to leave her home again. You must promise to make sure she has everything she needs, and that she never has to leave again” (91), as a result, Baby Halder returned to her marital house:

When the violence becomes too great for the victim to bear, a woman’s primary recourse often is to leave her husband’s family and return to her natal home…material poverty of her birth home, as well as the social stigma attached to a woman who leaves her husband, often discourages women from exercising this option. Most of the domestic violence victims interviewed by Human Rights Watch…were either unable or unwilling to return to their natal home, or were told by their parents that they must be patient, remain with their husbands and endure…. (Sacrificing Women 18-19)

Poverty and strained relations with her stepmother at her natal house and enforcement from her father forced Baby Halder to return to a violent husband.

Baby Halder’s marital sufferings made her empathize with the sufferings of her mother and her elder sister: “the personal” in women’s life narratives “[h]as a primary emphasis on the relation of self to others. However, this relatedness was traced to the dependence imposed on women by the patriarchal system, or then it was upheld as a fundamental female quality” (Stanton 138). Baby Halder through her mother’s and her elder sister’s narratives and through the short descriptive collage of the women in the neighbourhood, like Panna’s wife, whose husband Panna, “burnt her to death. She was a beautiful doll-like woman, a dusky skin, curly hair…and he just burnt her to death!” Her only fault was that she was “watching television, he was enraged and he caught hold of her and dragged her home” (LLO 103), weaves together the different facets of atrocities women face both directly and indirectly from the males in the family and the society.
Baby Halder begins her life narrative *A Life Less Ordinary* with the memory of her mother and also concludes it with her memory: “Had she been alive today and seen that her Baby was able to read and was learning to do more, how happy she would have been” (174). The circumstances were unfavourable but “despite all her difficulties, she did not let us stop studying” (1). Her mother’s biography and her life narrative signal the horrifying vulnerability of women. Observing her mother’s helplessness, she became conscious of the marginalization and victimization of Dalit women who not only suffer because of poverty but also suffer violence at the hands of their husbands. Caroline McGee in her book *Childhood Experiences of Domestic Violence* (2001) states that in a survey it is found that “mothers were also concerned about the impact of the domestic violence on their children and for many of the mothers ‘this was the trigger which led to their leaving’” (69). Baby Halder’s mother too chose the same path.

Upendranath Haldar, when in service hardly showed any concern for the family and irregularly sent money home: “…there were gaps of several months” (*LLO* 1). In such circumstances, Baby Halder’s mother made desperate attempts to provide basic amenities to the children:

Ma found it very difficult to make do: how could she not?....Meanwhile Didi, my elder sister was growing up and that was another worry on Ma’s head. Ma asked Baba’s friend for help but none of them was in a position to take on the burden of another family. Ma also thought of taking up a job, but that would have meant going out of the house, which she had never done. And after all, what work could she do? Another of her worries was: what would people say? (1-2)

By unfolding her mother’s story Baby Halder in *A Life Less Ordinary* re-presents and represents the distress of Dalit mothers who along with the societal and cultural pressures, are also burdened with the responsibilities of family and children. Her mother’s desperation shaped her own childhood. Despite the difficulties Baby Halder’s mother never dared to cross the threshold of the house and look for work. When a woman contravenes societal expectations, she is judged far more harshly than her male counterpart. A woman living inside the house is viewed as an angel whereas a woman who goes outside to work is considered a bad woman. The ideal woman or “the Angel in the House” is defined by her role within the house because the family serves as a
sanctuary for the “preservation of traditional moral and religious values” (Zedner 12). Dependence is imposed on women by the patriarchal system and it is advocated as a fundamental womanly quality: “If we women also go on a trip to buy materials and stay outside, they would think we are ‘bad women’ and come to harass us....” (a woman qtd. in Zhang 187-188). This explains that the “impossibility of women” is grounded in the “cultural factors” (188). Women’s going out to work for earning is not a part of the acceptable culture: “But worrying about what people will say does not help to fill on empty stomach, does it?” (LLO 2). It is not the individual who is important but how people evaluate her becomes important. Baby Halder tries to voice and re-presents the societal and cultural factors which intervene in the personal as well as the public life of Dalit women.

   Baby Halder too suffered harassment when she left her husband and went to Delhi to work as a domestic helper: “People talked about my being alone, living in a rented house, and having just the children with me. And because of this, many thought I was fair game and I faced quite a bit of harassment. Some men would make the excuse that they wanted water to drink and would push their way into my home. Or, if I went somewhere with the children, they’d follow me and try to force me to talk to them” (153). A woman without a man’s support often becomes the object of exploitation for other men: “…[s]ingle and divorced women are subjected to more sexual harassment than married women…that the nature of women’s reactions to sexual harassment depends on the status of the harasser and the perceived motivation of the harasser” (Crouch 135). Men perceived Baby Halder alone with children as weak, and therefore easy to harass.

   Baby Halder probes deep into the sufferings of her mother: “She was in terrible state. I was a little better off than her because at least I had some friends, especially Tutul and Dolly, who I could always talk to and who loved me a lot” (LLO 2). Her mother suffered with no one to share her pain. When the daughter narrates her life story, she also tells the untold story of her mother because she recognizes the mother as a fellow victim that unites daughter with the mother:

   Many daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively, ‘whatever comes.’ A mother’s victimization does
not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman….The mother’s self-hatred and low expectations are the binding rags for the psyche of the daughter. (Rich 243)

Baby Halder voices the untold anguish of her mother. Her father took her elder sister Sushila to Karimpur to finalize her marriage without taking his wife into confidence, thus turning his wife to nonentity:

…the man enjoys absolute authority, power, all privileges, and makes every decision as the undisputed “head of the family.” He is addressed and elevated to the position of the annadata (giver of grains) and grihkarta (household authority). The man is practically worshipped. Even in law, the “father” is assumed to be the natural guardian of his children. The fact that he may have abused his wife, and the children, does not adversely affect a man’s position. (Bhattacharya 19-20)

Baby Halder recalls her mother’s suffering: “she couldn’t live like this anymore.” Suddenly, it all turned out to be too much for her and “one day, with grief in her heart and my little brother in her arms, she just walked away from home” (LLO 3).

Carolyn Kay Steedman in “Stories” states that her mother “shaped my childhood by the stories she carried from her own, and from an earlier family history. They were stories designed to show me the terrible unfairness of things.” Similarly, the suffering of her mother shaped not only Baby Halder’s childhood but also her life narrative: “the development of gender in particular social and class circumstances” (244). Reflecting on her mother’s victimization in her life narrative, Baby Halder re-presents the distress and misery of mother and daughter in particular and Dalit women in general.

Baby Halder’s elder brother’s efforts bore fruit after many years when he found his mother and brought her to his house:

Anger, sadness, happiness: didn’t she feel any of these at seeing her children after so many years?....I looked at her again. She looked ill. She spoke very little. She still had sindoor in her hair, a large tika on her forehead. But for whom? For a man who had no time to remember her, who was doing perfectly well without her? (LLO 115)
Sindoor and tika are the symbols of an Indian married woman. Whether her husband is good or bad, a wife has to showcase these symbols as long as her husband is alive as a mark of her devotion to him. Her brother also took her to see her husband: “The ways of enslaving woman in the patriarchal society are very subtle. The total sacrifice of personality is framed out in such a way that if she doesn’t follow the code of conduct, she will underestimate herself…the intention of man to enslave her is transformed into her own intention to become a pativrata” (Athalye 72). Afterwards her mother died in a hospital and Upendranath Halder did not even bother to visit her.

Baby Halder in her life narrative strikes the male-dominated society which has different set of codes for men and women. Her elder sister Sushila was strangled to death by her husband Mangal, who was involved with another woman. He found Sushila an obstacle in his way, so he killed her: “…he…caught hold of her throat and began to strangle her. When her tongue started to come out…and she could not speak any more, he let her go and she fell with a thud to the ground” (LLO 67). Baby Halder exposes the conventional Indian sexual politics in which “While adultery is excused as “the way of men,” the women…are expected to adhere to a more rigorous morality while meekly accepting their spouses’ transgression” (S. Nair 59). Indian society expects woman to be mute and compassionate and demands compromise and devotion from her for her husband.

Her mother, her elder sister Sushila, and other subjugated women became an agency of awareness for Baby Halder: “Everything will be changed once woman gives woman to the other woman. There is hidden and always ready in woman the source….It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman…” (Cixous 83). It dawned upon her that she would suffer as long as she remains a dependent. As the mother of three children—two sons and one daughter- she took up the work of a domestic worker for survival. Moving into the public space, she realized the hypocrisy of the upper caste people. The family where she got the work was “Brahmin and they had all the customary practices of purity and pollution. But they were quite prepared to let me do everything for them because, after all, they could not do without domestic help” (LLO 108). This reveals the deception of the upper caste people
who perform all kinds of rituals to keep the low caste people away whom they think are polluted. However, when there is a need they allow the low caste women to work in their houses as domestic workers and let them touch their utensils and cook food for them. In this context Subdhara Mitra Channa comments: “This in itself shows that subjugation of the Dalits is not based on any criteria of religion or purity or pollution as the upper castes claim. It is a matter of exploitation and extraction of labor and services at the cheapest possible terms from the Dalits” (267). Hence, untouchability is just a gambit to exploit Dalit women.

In spite of the brutality of her husband, Baby Halder thought about him while boarding the train to New Delhi as: “…the care perspective is more characteristic of women’s sense of moral agency” (Carol Gilligan qtd. in Bowden and Mummery 129). Baby Halder was worried about the future: “I was leaving everything behind, and who knew what awaited me in the future? Would I be able to look after these children? To bring them up properly?” (LLO 122). But she was firm in her decision to discover her self and to change her life as well as the life of her children. Baby Halder, like Nora in Henrik Ibsen’s A Doll’s House (1879), who jumps out of male authority: “When I was at home with papa, he told me his opinion about everything, and so I had the same opinions…And when I came to live with you….I mean that I was simply transferred from papa’s hands into yours….I don’t believe any longer in wonderful things happening….Goodbye” (108-18), breaks herself away from male chauvinism to discover her self.

Initially Baby Halder resided with her elder brother but when she found it difficult to get along with them, she decided to find work with the provision for accommodation. She spent many days in search of work but wherever she went, the same question was asked: “‘Where is your husband?’” When she replied: “‘he was not with me…the prospect of a job would disappear’” (LLO 129). A woman who leaves her husband’s house is perceived as a bad woman: “Divorce or living apart from one’s husband continues to be a deep-rooted social stigma for Indian women. The failure of a marriage is always considered the wife’s fault, and becomes a reflection of her character, morals or child-bearing ability” (Ramanathan 11). Baby Halder’s relatives did not want to help or keep any communication with her after she left her husband. When her younger brother’s
friend Nitai tried to help her in finding work her younger brother “was displeased” and he told Nitai: “If she comes to you, I will break my friendship with you” (LLO 133).

A Life Less Ordinary re-presents and represents the issues of Dalit women who work as domestic workers. When Baby Halder started to work as a domestic worker in a family which gave her place to stay her working hours increased from 8 am to 7 pm: “For full-time domestic workers, who live at the employers’ home, there seems to be no limit to working hours” (Gothoskar 71). As domestic worker she endured inhuman working condition and exploitation at the hands of her employers. Her eldest son was working somewhere else. The lady of the house, where Baby Halder was working, never allowed her to talk to anyone or go and see her eldest son. Baby Halder had no time for her children: “I couldn’t understand why, but people were always after me: do this, do that, there’s work to be done here, and here…and because they had given me a place to stay, I couldn’t even say anything” (LLO 136). She was dying to see her son. One day while returning from the market, she went to her elder brother where she saw her son “to have all kinds of cuts and bruises on his hands and feet and he couldn’t walk properly. His foot was bleeding” (138). She took him to the doctor and got late. The lady of the house was angry and scolded her: “Yes, yes, go. Go, every day why don’t you? Leave your work and go off, wander about outside” (139). Even her son was not allowed to enter the gate and talk to his mother and siblings. In this context Sujata Gothoskar’s comments seem appropriate: “Extracting maximum work seems to be a universal employer instinct!” (71).

In 2012, in an interview given to Outlook magazine, Baby Halder remarked:

…don’t think you can call such people [who mistreat their helpers] educated. It’s the people who think of the well-being of the poor who are the educated ones. The middle class is busy running after money. It’s as if the poor don’t exist, as if they are machines that the rich can use and simply forget about. (qtd. in “Baby Halder”)

Unable to bear further, Baby Halder left the job and shifted in a rented accommodation in a rented room and once again began her search for work.

After a long wait she found work in the house of “the Sahib” (LLO 146) named Prabodh Kumar, grandson of the famous writer Premchand. This work brought a change in her life. He treated her like his own daughter and became her mentor and moral
support: “He was concerned that I do not suffer any more” (148). He helped her eldest son in finding a job where he could study and work: “a good place where he could work and where he would have time to study as well” (160). He provided her accommodation to stay “emptied out a room on the roof of his house for me” (156). He also encouraged her to read and write:

There were several books in Bengali too and I would sometimes dip into them. One day I was dusting in that room when Tatush came in. He saw that I was looking at a Bangla book, but he did not say anything then. The next day in the morning when I came to work and went in to give him his tea, he asked if I knew how to read and write….Upstairs, he pulled a book out of the cupboard and said, “Tell me, what is this book called?”…. “Go, on,” he urged me. “Read. Read something at least.” So I blurted out, “Amar Meyebela, Taslima Nasrin”….He said, “Here. Take this book home and read it if you like.” (150-51).

Baby Halder could read Bangla. Prabodh Kumar gave her Amar Meyebela (2004), the life narrative by Taslima Nasreen. She started reading a page or two everyday: “It was as if I was reading my own life” (Baby Halder qtd. in Mahanta). By reading Amar Meyebela, she came to know about Taslima Nasreen and her life story. She found similarities between Taslima Nasreen’s and her own sufferings. Both had a disturbed childhood. The neighbours “were very surprised and began to comment on my reading but I did not really care” (LLO 151). When Prabodh Kumar found her engrossed in thoughts “he suggested one of the oldest cures in the world: he asked her to tell a story” (Reddy vi). Writing acted as a remedial healing to her bruised mind: “…writing…serves as a therapeutic tool…writing is a powerful and astonishing means of …self-discovery….It facilitates the expansion of memory…writing opens up spaces for development, for growth and for empowerment and enables writers to see meaningful life experiences in a new light…” (14). The narrative text is a mental activity through which the narrator experiences life. Seeing Baby Halder’s urge to tell, Prabodh Kumar gave her a notebook and a pen and asked her to write down her life story:

Here. Write something in this notebook. If you want, you can write your life story in this. Whatever has happened in your life ever since you can remember up to now, write it down. Try to write a little bit every day. (LLO 152)
Her life narrative gave her space to discover her own ‘self’. She got the opportunity to represent herself and voice the victimization of Dalit women who suffered and are suffering like her. She started writing every day: “I would write, then I would read Taslima Nasrin’s book” (152). Prabodh Kumar helped Baby Halder in every possible way: “You’re like my daughter, and you are now the daughter of this house. Don’t ever think that you don’t belong here” (149). Writing made her more introspective in understanding situations, people and society, and her own self: “Had I understood this wisdom earlier, I would not have had to suffer so much” (167). She understood that everyone wants to be happy and does not want to be bothered by others. The pages she wrote, Prabodh Kumar sent to his friends for comments. They appreciated her and encouraged her to publish her life narrative:

“Dear Baby”….. “I cannot tell you how happy I was to read your manuscript. How did you learn to write so well? Your writing is excellent and your Tatush has really found a jewel in you….Please continue to read and write in Bangla. Many of my friends wanted to read your story and I have shown it to them. One of my friends would like to have your story published in a paper but first you must bring it to some sort of conclusion. And I want to tell you that you must never stop writing Remember that God has placed you on this earth to write. My blessings are with you.” (163)

The day came and Prabodh Kumar handed her a packet in which “There was a magazine inside. She started to turn the pages when her own name jumped out at her. Surprised, she looked again, and it was true it was there! The words said: Aalo Aandhari, Baby Halder!” (172). A faceless and unheard Baby Halder had become a writer. Her life narrative paved her way in literary space which helped her to have a space in the society which neglected her sufferings and distress.

Baby Halder dedicates her life narrative A Life Less Ordinary to her teachers, who taught her the Bengali language and Bengali literature at school and because of them she was able to write down her life’s experiences: “…whatever I am writing now would not have been possible had it not been for my teachers, both the masters and the didis, who taught me the Bengali language and Bengali literature at school. This is why I have
chosen to dedicate this book to them” (Halder, Dedication v). Her mother remained a source of inspiration and encouragement to her:

    Baby looked at the sky, as if searching for her mother, as if to say to her, ‘Ma, come and see once, I still want to read and write, I want my children read and write. They need your blessings Ma.’ Baby was talking to her mother, and her face was wet with tears, her shirt damp as they slid down her chest and fell to the ground. (**LLO** 172)

Helene Cixous in her *The Laugh of the Medusa* expresses:

    Even if phallic mystification has generally contaminated good relationships, a woman is never far from “mother” (I mean outside her role functions: the “mother” as nonname and as source of goods). There is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. (82-83)

There is always a mother in her daughter. Baby Halder in her life narrative “seeks to reject, reconstruct, and reclaim—to locate and recontextualize—the mother’s message” (Brodzki 157). She rejects her mother’s surrender to the social structure that made her suffer. She recontextualizes her mother’s suffering and rebels against the social structure which make women victims and reclaim her mother’s desire to educate and aware herself as education and awareness are crucial in ending women’s victimization.

*A Life Less Ordinary* is an extraordinary life journey of a Dalit woman. In George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (1913) Professor Higgins acts as an agent who completely transforms the life of Eliza Doolittle, a flower girl: “Eliza, who is exquisitely dressed, produces an impression of such remarkable distinction and beauty as she enters that they all rise, quite flustered” (194). Similarly, in Baby Halder’s life, Prabodh Kumar played an important role. By giving her a pen and notebook he gave her the confidence to articulate her life story. *A Life Less Ordinary* represents and re-presents women who are suffering but not fortunate to meet a person like Prabodh Kumar to help them to come out of the gloom. In her life narrative, Baby Halder talks about Dalit girls’ and Dalit women’s issues. She talks as a child, as a daughter, as a wife, as a mother, as a female body, as a Dalit woman, as a domestic worker, as a writer and as an individual.

However, the concern remains why she has not touched the subject of domestic workers’ sexual harassment which Nalini Jameela narrates in her life narrative *The
Autobiography of a Sex Worker. Does Baby Halder deliberately maintain a dignified silence or has this subject not crossed her way? She leaves this subject unanswered. By articulating her past memories and experiences, her female bodily experiences, Baby Halder has made invisible visible and unheard heard. Malala Yousafzai who wrote her life narrative I’m Malala (2013): “…to raise her voice on behalf of the millions of girls around the world who are being denied their right to go to school and realise their potential. I hope my story will inspire girls to raise their voice and embrace the power within themselves…” (276). Similarly A Life Less Ordinary also appeals to Dalit women to move out of their shell, to come out into the light from darkness, and to resist violence.

Her life narrative is an appeal to women to be independent: to desist relying on others. Baby Halder asserts, “It’s possible to change. Look at me. I have managed to break free” (Nandi). Baby Halder negotiates her identity as an individual and as a Dalit woman from her marginal space as like bell hooks, for her the “space of radical openness is a margin” (hooks “Choosing the Margin” 206). Her life narrative establishes her identity as a dignified domestic worker and Dalit woman writer.