CHAPTER III

SOCIOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF THE CHARACTERS

3.1 Preliminaries

This chapter focuses on sociological background of the characters in the selected autobiographies: *The Branded, The Outcaste, The Prisons We Broke, Up from Slavery, Black Boy* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Indian Dalit and African American Autobiographies are sociological in nature. The characters depicted in these autobiographies from various social backgrounds make use of typical linguistic expressions which are worth studying from the sociological point of view. Characters from Indian Dalit autobiographies belong to the lowest stratum in Indian social structure whereas the characters from African American autobiographies are African black slaves transported to America. All these autobiographies deal with the theme of discrimination either on the basis of caste or race. The language used by these subaltern characters is influenced by the sociological factors. Therefore, studying the sociological background of the characters is one of the objectives of the present study.

This chapter aims at discussing the sociological background of characters in the selected autobiographies taking into account the linguistic behaviour of the characters as it reflects the nature of the characters and the social circumstances in which they live and grow. It is observed that the sociological background of the characters has a bearing on the use of language as is seen in the politeness and cooperative strategies they use while interacting with the masters or their superiors. The sociological background of the characters is revealed via the language they use in their conversations with the other characters. It is very essential to study the sociological background of the characters to understand the socio-cultural realities existing then. The utterances of the characters if studied in the context of the speech situation and the speech events in which they are involved, it helps establish the authenticity of the characters and the social situations.
In each of Indian Dalit and African American Autobiography, there are characters from disadvantaged social background. Most of them belong to the rural background. Therefore, discussing the sociological background of the characters is necessary to understand the inner layers of the minds of the characters in the autobiographies under study one by one.

3.2 The Branded

*The Branded* is Laxman Gaikwad’s Sahitya Academy Award winning autobiography written in Marathi entitled as *Uchalya*. Afterwards, it was translated into English by P.A. Kolharkar and published by Sahitya Academy. *The Branded* is a brilliantly presented life-story of Laxman Gaikwad, a member of Uchalya community. Uchalya community was a notified criminal tribe as per the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 in British India. The contemporary society had denied equal social status the tribe. The people of this community were deprived of all the necessities like food, clothing and education that were essential for leading a respectable and dignified human life. The community is known all over India as ‘Santmuchchar’ community. Sant means ‘market’ and muchchar means ‘thief.’ Hence Santmuchchar means one who steals from weekly market or bazaars. As the people are refused opportunities to earn their livelihood by respectable means, they are forced into pilfering. The Uchalya community is known by different names in different districts of Maharashtra. Some of the names are: Pathrut, Takari, Bhamta, Uchale, Girnewadar, Kamati, Ghantichor and Wadar. They have two surnames Jadhav and Gaikwad and each one has many clans or Kulams. The clans among Gaikwad include Ulonor, Bumonir, Kalpithnor and those among Jadhavs are Kaskonor, Papponor and Ilenor. We do not find the critical material or the authentic material on the nomadic tribes in British India. According to P. A. Kolharkar (2009):

“No systematic ethnological, historical and sociological studies are available on these tribes.”

The autobiography is an authentic document, which presents bitter truth of the social conditions of the tribe. People of the Uchalya community do not go for jobs as per the
law of the country. Moreover, they believe that sending their children to school would doom their community. As a result, they beat their children to teach them thieving skills. Mastering these skills ensure the security against starvation. The training to bear the beatings of the police is also given to children, as this is the only risk factor they have in their profession. The trainer takes six months’ earnings as his fee for this training after the pupil is fully trained.

There are four thieving skills:

i. Khistang matne – picking pockets.

ii. Chappal, muthal aanane – stealing footwear and bundles of things.

iii. Paddu ghalane – deception.

iv. Uthewaari – deception by sleight of hand while engaging a person in conversation, e.g. substituting spurious gold for the genuine (p.10).

Acquiring these skills, the youth from the community becomes the perfect thief. Being notified as criminal, any one of the Uchalya community has to obtain a permit from the police-patil (a village headman in charge of law and order) to leave a place for more than three days. Therefore, the pass is worshipped as a God and the blade as Laxmi, the goddess of wealth. The people cannot go out according to their wish.

*The Branded* also highlights the trials and tribulations of the the Uchalyas. Gaikwad virtually rescued them from obscurity bringing the problems posed by their social and economic conditions to the attention of society and placed them firmly on the social and cultural map of Maharashtra and the neighbouring regions. As an autobiographical narrative Laxman Gaikwad is a pioneer in revealing with masterful sensitivity the inner feelings, the suffering and the exploitation of tribes historically reviewed as criminals. The novel tells the life story of a member of the Uchalyas who overcame the disabilities arising from the circumstances of birth and who emerged as a leader of the dispossessed people.

*The Branded* also throws light on how education is an important factor for the development of an individual’s life as well as society. Though conditions of the Uchalya community are so miserable, Martand (Laxman’s father) knows the importance of education. He enrolls Laxman in the school. He gives Laxman ‘a slate
and pencil’ instead of a ‘Bharat blade’ and challenges the established social structure. He opposes the belief of his community that education is of no use for Uchalya. In spite of thefts, merciless beatings, illegal arrests, heart-rending poverty and starvation back home, Laxman attends school regularly. Later on, he gets a decent job and begins his fight against the exploitation of Uchalya people. He works relentlessly for social awareness of the community. Gaikwad reaches at a decent position among respected and educated people in society. The development and change in Laxman’s life is brought about through education. His life proves that education is one of the imperative means of raising the conscience of community towards injustice, violence and inequality entrenched in the social order.

The Branded is a poignant satire on social inequality. It reveals a protest against inhumanities of law, of political structures as well as those of caste and class structures in postcolonial India. Laxman Gaikwad reveals his resistance to the corrupt and unjust practices and his attempts to gather the branded community. The people from Uchalya community live the life excluded from mainstream society and individual opportunities. The community struggles with inequality and injustice at every level. The police, moneylenders and unjust laws exploit and deny every opportunity of living an honest life to the people of Uchalya community. At the end, this community stands firm against such structures to bring changes in it.

The above explanation illustrates that the autobiography is a literary and socially significant document, which voices the authentic experiences of the invisible and silent people. It is a testimony, which document trauma and strategies of survival. Laxman Gaikwad makes an eloquent attempt to bring people round to the view that the people of these tribes are human beings and need to be brought into the mainstream of life. He says that he writes ‘to awaken this bourgeois society to the sorrows and plight of my unfortunate community’ (Uchalya: viii). In translating Uchalya into English P.A.Kolharkar has enlightened non-Marathi readers about the unknown world of the Uchalya tribe.

There are several characters in the autobiography whose social background must be studied as it makes impact on their linguistic behaviour. Laxman Gaikwad being the narrator plays a vital role as the central character. Through his own story, he unveils
the evil and superstitious practices that existed in and around the society in which he lives and grows. The sociological background of the characters is discussed thoroughly as follows:

1. Laxman Gaikwad

Laxman Gaikwad was born in 1956 at Dhanegaon in Latur Taluka in a criminal tribe of Maharashtra. This tribe named as Uchalya is a criminal tribe identified by British under the Tribal Act of India. Laxman is the only child in this tribe who got admitted in a school. While in school, Gaikwad gets attracted to ‘bhajans’ and ‘kirtans’ and excels in performing them. Participating in these religious functions, the effects of Sanskritization start influencing his young mind. He begins to observe Fridays and Saturdays in Shravan month as fasting days. Education makes Laxman conscious of his rights and this leads to an upward mobility in the socio-economic ladder. From a starving boy, humiliated and insulted in his village, he acquires dignity and self respect.

In due course of time, Gaikwad moves to the nearby city of Latur for employment in a textile mill. He works as a cotton mill worker, moving on to become a powerful trade union leader and social worker. In the textile mill, Gaikwad starts speaking on behalf of his colleagues for better working conditions and wages. As he was used to public speaking right from his school days, he stands up and publicly denounces the ill-treatment meted out to him by the factory management. The revolutionary spirit in him makes him plunge into politics thinking that it is a sharp weapon to bring the desirable change in the social structure.

It is due to his protests against the factory management and the capitalist forces; Gaikwad loses his job and has to do many odd jobs wherever he can find them. In due course of time, he establishes himself as a leader of the community. He dedicates his life for the welfare of people. Whenever any news about the harassment of any tribal reaches his ears, he immediately pays a visit and tries to bring about justice and deal with the situation. He fights for all those people who are falsely accused and imprisoned and brings hope in their lives. He publishes the injustice meted out against the tribes in newspapers, writes to the political leaders and even takes on the police.
Later on, Gaikwad contests the Lok Sabha election on the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) ticket. The Party promises him funds and other necessities for campaigning, but fails to keep the promises. Gaikwad, with his loyal supporters, continues to campaign trail. There is no food for his campaigners and money to pay the pending bills. Eventually, he decides to lend his support to the Congress candidate. Dejected, he says, “I had learnt my lesson. In this country it is not enough to possess good workers and volunteers to win elections; you must also possess wealth, social prestige and the quality of having been born in one of the higher castes.” Laxman Gaikwad ends the memoir saying, ‘Now my obsession is to seek various ways in which to foster and strengthen tribal movements intellectually so that a complete transformation can be achieved of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes, the Scheduled Castes, and the exploited and downtrodden underdogs’ (p.233).

2. Martand (Father)

Martand, Laxman’s father, is a watchman at Chamle’s house. Being a serviceman, he understands the conditions a little better. He insists that every child of the community must get education. Martand gives his son, Laxman, “a slate and pencil” instead of a “Bharat blade”. He enrolls Laxman’s name in a primary school for children. He challenges hierarchies of castes in the Indian social structure. As a result, he is tortured by his own community. In spite of this, he encourages Laxman to acquire education. It is only because of Martand’s strong support that Laxman gets his education. Martand succeeds in his efforts.

Martand does not like Laxman to go on thieving trips with his brothers. He prevents Laxman to accompany his maternal grandfather, Sayabu Tata, on hunting trips because of Tata’s dirty eating habits. Whenever a family member eats a mouse, cat or fish, Martand punishes him. Moreover, Martand preserves the values of honesty, truth and hard work and never resorts to stealing. He takes advance pay from his employer for Laxman’s education, but never thinks of stealing.

Martand opposes the belief of his community that education is futile for an Uchalya. When his own tribe resolves to ostracize Martand for sending his son Laxman to
school, he seeks the intervention of the Panchayat and Kulkarni Guruji. Guruji convinces the higher caste people that it is not Laxman’s presence in school, which caused loose motions in their children. He explains to them that their children are in need of medical aid because they are suffering from cholera. Martand succeeds in his efforts and Laxman is able to continue his school. Consequently, the higher caste people and his own tribesmen get convinced.

3. Dhondabai (Mother)

Dhondabai, Gaikwad’s mother, also rejects the Uchalyas’ traditional ways of earning livelihood. She is beaten by the police for thefts committed by her sons, and also by her husband, Dhondabai supports her family by selling milk. The earnings help her get iron sheets for their hut. She sells her sheep for the release of her arrested son but never steals even in adverse conditions. Her poor health results in an abrupt end to the milk-selling business. Dhondabai’s resistance to the traditional ways of earning suggests other ways that the Uchalyas could adopt to earn their livelihood with dignity.

4. Sayabu-Tata

Sayabu-Tata is Laxman’s maternal grandfather. He devises innovative ways of thieving. He uses rats for thefts: sets them free in a field of full-grown wheat at night, and digs up the rat holes after the harvesting. Neither the farmers nor the police object to Tata’s style. It is because these wheatears are rat-infested and of no use to the farmers that he cannot be accused of stealing. Thus, Tata escapes starvation. While carrying on his everyday practice, Tata devises a “tactic” to make his living. This innovative style carves out a space for an Uchalya who is normally not even allowed to touch the flour ground by higher castes. It also exemplifies alternative means of earning bread that help the tribe to escape the clutches of the money-lenders and the police.
5. Manikdada (Elder Brother)

Manikdada, Laxman’s elder brother, is a thief. He is actively engaged in thieving profession. He goes on thieving trips to the fairs at various places. He receives the training from Santaram and Sakharam. He becomes expert in the arts and skills of thieving profession. Later on, Manikdada works as a sweeper in the spinning mill at Latur.

6. Harchanda

Harchanda, Laxman’s immediate elder brother, is also very good at thieving. He is subject to epileptic fits and has attacks particularly on the full moon days. Whenever he goes near water or fire he gets an attack of epileptic fits. Sticky saliva dribbles from his mouth just as it dribbles from the mouth of a mad dog. On such days, he growls and moves restlessly about the hut in a doglike manner. Because of the haunting fear of beatings and frequent attacks of epileptic fits, he could not carry on thieving. He begs Jogva in the neighbouring villages for his living.

7. Kulkarni Guruji

Kulkarni Guruji is the bamman (Brahmin) teacher. Guruji convinces the higher caste people that it is not Laxman’s presence in school, which caused loose motions in their children. He explains to them that their children are in need of medical aid because they are suffering from cholera.

8. Shobha Jagtap

Shobha Jagtap, an engineer’s daughter, is a beautiful girl from a rich family who had fallen in love with Laxman. She is bolder than Laxman in speaking. Later on, she marries to a teacher and dies in her first pregnancy two years later.

9. Chhabu

Chhabu, Laxman’s wife, hails from a rural background (Kavatha village). She is not familiar to the ways of the city-life. She is illiterate. Her mother tongue is Telugu; she is not used to speaking in Marathi.
This study of characters reveals the social setting in which they live. Several aspects of the Uchalya community emphasize the social behaviour of the characters. The next autobiography is ‘The Outcaste’ by Sharankumar Limbale.

3.3 The Outcaste

Sharankumar Limbale is a well known Dalit writer, editor, critic and author. He is one of the most renowned Dalit voices in India. He is an eminent writer and his writings mostly rest on the Dalit struggle for equality. He is particularly known for his autobiography entitled as Akkarmashi, a masterpiece in Dalit Literature. It is originally written in Marathi language and later on translated into Hindi, Tamil, Kannada, Punjabi, Guajarati and Malayalam languages. It is widely acknowledged all over the world especially after the translation into English as The Outcaste by Santhosh Bhoomkar. ‘Akkarmashi’ is a Marathi word, which means one who is an outcaste or illegitimate. This is a story of a person who has no identity, no home and that is wanted nowhere.

The Outcaste is a story of an untouchable, Sharankumar Limbale, in general and Mahar community in particular. The author recalls about how an innocent Dalit couple Ithal Kamble and his wife, Masamai are exploited by village Patil Hanmantha Limbale. Ithal Kamble is a farm worker on a yearly contract to Hanmantha Limbale. One day Hanmantha Patil exploits and ruins the woman and it brings about the separation of the couple. After the divorce, Masamai continues to be a keep of Hanmantha Limbale and gives birth to Sharankumar Limbale. Hanmantha Limbale refuses to accept Sharankumar as his child. Therefore, Masamai leaves Akkalkot and goes to Hanoor where Santamai, Masamai’s mother lives with Jamadar, a Muslim whom Sharankumar Limbale calls ‘Dada’. Sharankumar experiences caste discrimination right from his childhood. As a schoolboy, he goes for picnic. At the picnic spot, the Dalit students and the upper caste students sit under separate trees for lunch. Limbale writes, “Even the tree we sat under was tattered like us. Whenever the wind shook it branches it produced waves of hot air that hit our faces. We sat in its broken shadow.” After the lunch, the teacher asks the high caste boys to collect the leftovers on a piece of paper and give it to the Dalit children. Another incident Limbale experiences is about the discrimination in religious practice. One day, Sharankumar and his friend Parshya enter the temple and prostrate directly before the
God in the temple of Ithoba. Parshya’s father beats him, as entering a temple is a crime for Dalit people.

Sharankumar moves from his native place, Chapalgaon to Solapur to pursue higher education. He recalls that Dalit students live with limited facilities in the hostels. Living with minimum facilities in hostels is also a form of discrimination. They do not enjoy the luxuries of college life. They take their education amidst great poverty. Sharankumar and Mallya continue their studies up to B.A. right from the primary school. Both of them are not only classmates but also good friends. But, the marriage proposal to Sharankumar resulted in a break between them. Mallya’s parents refuse the proposal because Sharankumar is not of pure blood. They love conventions more than human beings.

*The Outcaste* depicts the journey of Sharankumar’s life crammed with humiliating and insulting incidents occurred due to caste discrimination. It tells about many more unfavourable and unfortunate incidents that he experienced as a man belonging to the lower caste community. It also portrays his struggle for establishing himself as Dalit.

In this autobiography, the characters come from diverse social background. They have different linguistic traits. The sociological background influences their language. Sharankumar Limbale, the central character, caste discrimination

1. Sharankumar Limbale

Sharan is an ‘Akkarmashi’ that is his parentage was unacknowledged through the legitimacy of marriage. He is born of a high caste father, Hanmanta Limbale, a Patil and an untouchable mother, Masamai Kamble, a Mahar. Basically, he is a product of a rape, but is considered a ‘bastard’ because his high-caste father does not recognize him. Therefore, in many ways, he is outcaste within a community of outcastes.

The protagonist, Sharan, is haunted by his fractured identity. He throughout his life tries to find out his own roots and identity. He gets the horrible experience in childhood days of his early life in school. The teacher calls him ‘a son of a bitch.’ Sharan has to struggle to get his education. His father, an upper caste Patil, refuses to
accept him as his son. This curse of being ‘fatherless’ follows Limbale all throughout his life. It becomes the most dreadful of barrier in the most decisive moments in his life as seeking an admission in school or college and the prospect of getting married.

Sharan is ostracized even in his own family. He never gets the full affection of his mother and father. His mother always treats him as if he is her step son. He, throughout his life, comes across a number of incidents of discriminatory meted out to him by the caste Hindus. He does not succumb to the pitiable existence but acquires liberation and freedom from his purgatory of caste through education.

2. Masamai (Mother)

Masamai, Sharan’s mother, was initially married to Ithal Kamble who leaves her when he discovers Masamai’s sexual relation with Hanmanta Limbale, a Patil and the landowner. Masamai was forced to leave her little baby and four year old son due to her liaison with Limbale. Ithal Kamble remarried after this separation. After Sharan’s birth, Limbale started avoiding Masamai and refuses to acknowledge Sharan as his son. As a result, Masamai has to take shelter in the house of Santamai. Masamai is beautiful and she suffers for it. Her beauty becomes a curse for her as she has born in a low caste. She has to constantly bear the assaults of lustful people. Later Masamai becomes a keep of another Patil, Yeshwantrao Sidramappa Patil who is called Kaka and gives birth to eight children. Despite her liberality in sexual matters, she is portrayed as a victim of the social order, which makes the Dalit women an easy prey to the licentious upper caste landlords. The abject poverty and helplessness makes Masamai surrender to the lust of Patils. In the author’s note, the writer calls her “not an adulteress but the victim of a social system” (p. ix) who has been raped by the upper caste men.

3. Santamai (Grandmother)

Santamai is Sharan’s grandmother. He is so much attached with her that instead of his mother Masamai, he prefers to live with her. She too treats him like her own son and undergoes great hardships to bring him up and educate him. Santamai is an ordinary Dalit woman. Her mouth smells foul and her teeth are quite black from the herbal
powder she-used to clean them with. She gathers dung for making cakes of dung to sell them. Due to her hard work and constant starvation, her skin has dried up and shriveled. She herself eats bhakaris made out of the jowar grains washed out of the dung of animals and gives Sharan bhakaris out of the flour collected as alms.

Santamai has to bear the burden of begging, sweeping and arranging for the survival of her family. Whenever Sharan felt hungry, Shantamai begged Bhakari for him. When Sharan was a little boy, she used to tie him on her back while sweeping the village streets. Her attachment to Sharan is genuine and deep.

4. Hanmanta Limbale

Hanmanta Limbale is Sharan’s biological father. He is a high caste Patil of Baslegaon. He ruins the poor family of Ithal Kamble and Masamai. Hanmanth exploits the beauty of Masamai but refuses to accept Sharan as his son. He is conscious of his self-identity. As a result, he never dares to keep Masamai in his family and always keeps her in Akkalkot as she is a low caste woman.

5. Shewanta

Shewanta, Sharan’s love, is ten or eleven years old. She never smiles wholeheartedly. She never oils her hair. Her eyes are as humble as cow’s. She understands Sharan’s signal and responds positively to it. She follows him on the way to the river.

6. Kaka

Yeshwantrao Sidramappa Patil is the head of the village named Hanoor. He is called as Kaka. He not only has Masamai as a keep; he has another woman called Jani, a Gondhali woman as his concubine.

7. Dada

Dada, Mahmood Dastagir Jamadar, is Sharan’s grandfather in the sense that he lives with Santamai, Sharan’s grandmother. Dada is a first son of the first wife of Dastagir Jamadar, a Muslim. He marries to a woman from Barhanpur. They are childless, so
his wife deserts him. He loses his job with the village council and later on starts working as a porter in the bus station. He carries loads of luggage to the top of the bus. Dada looks after Sharan with great affection as if he is his own child.

8. Ithal Kamble

Ithal Kamble, Masamai’s husband, is a farm laborer on the plantation of one of the landlords on a yearly contract basis. He toils on the farm owned by Hanmanta Limbale. He earns seven or eight hundred rupees per year. He works hard, day and night, on the fields as well as in the house of the landlord. He is a bonded labour who works like a bullock. He spends all his life in a castle shed of a landlord. He deserts his wife after being exploited by the Patil.

All the characters in this autobiography give an impeccably touching account of their relationships and vibrant life experiences. The language used by all the characters is a characteristic feature of the autobiography. The next autobiography is Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke*.

3.4 The Prisons We Broke

Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* is a revolutionary autobiography of a Dalit woman. Her narrative has its own history of publication. Kamble recorded her life experiences in scrap papers and kept them in her petty shop. An America-born researcher and sociologist, Maxine Berntson visited the Dalit settlement Phaltan in 1982. She met Kamble and collected her writings to serialise them as *Jina Amucha* (1982) in the women magazine ‘Stree’. Later on, Maya Pandit, Professor and Teacher-Educator at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, translated *Jina Amucha* from Marathi into English in 1986 with twelve chapters. *The Prisons We Broke* is a remarkable account of the role played by Dalit women in bringing the change in social position of the Dalits. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is the main source of inspiration for Baby Kamble. Like other Dalit autobiographers, Kamble states the influence of Ambedkar on Dalit women. She describes Ambedkar’s contribution in bringing the transformation in the status of Dalits in Indian society. She, very realistically, presents the detailed picture of the life of Dalit community.
She explicitly reveals how Brahmins overpower the people of the Mahar community and how the Mahars fought against them to attain respectable position in the Indian society.

In this autobiography, Baby Kamble portrays real picture of the degraded position of the Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular. We come across real experiences in which Dalit women are treated as inferior to men. Moreover, they experience discriminations, humiliations, exploitations, oppressions, control and violence. Baby Kamble with other women of the community protests against the inhuman conditions caused by the caste system in India. Mahar women have to put up with practices of untouchability in their day-to-day life. They would have to keep their clothes closer to their bodies and also have to tell the children from the upper castes to keep a distance. Mahar women were not allowed to express their feelings. Moreover, they were not allowed to touch the goods of upper caste people but have to clean the toilet, vessels, and food-grains. Like other Dalit students of the past, Kamble was humiliated, harassed, and discriminated against by not only her classmates but also by her teachers. The teachers were also in favour of the upper caste students and punished Kamble and her friends when caste Hindu students made complaints against them.

*The Prisons We Broke* is the first autobiography written by a Dalit woman. In the memoir, she talks about the life in her village, called Veergaon. In her memory, the Maharwadas never had a prosperous life. It was full of ignorance and dominated by poverty and epidemics. Death rate was high because of the ceaseless starvation and lack of medical facilities for the fatal epidemics. Moreover, superstitions adorned their blindness. Though Hindu religion and gods considered Mahars as outcaste, Mahar community upheld the Hindu principles and they thought of gods with great sanctity. Potrajas and Waghya-Murali are common in the village. They never forget to give offerings to gods. Generations after generations Mahar community broke their heads on the stones of Hindu temples with hopes. However, the effect was curses. They smeared ‘kumkum’ and ‘haldi’ on the gods. The possessed women are greeted with respect as it is believed that they could speak about the future of the Maharwada. In this connection, Vrushali Nagarale (2011), in her article ‘Discourse analysis of African-American and Dalit Women’s Selected Works/biographies: A Comparative Study’ says:
"The Prison We Broke talks more about Dalits’ blind beliefs and superstitions. Both men and women possessed the evil spirit and considered it as the curse of God and Goddesses."²

Women in the Maharwada led miserable life. They had to do all the household chores and earn their livelihood by selling wood. They fed their children with the leftovers collected from other places. On the festivals, they had to plaster their house with cow dung and clean the utensils and the clothes. As per the custom of child marriage, the girls got married at the age of eight or nine. They had to led a very pathetic life at their husband’s home. They had to put up with the abuse by her in-laws.

In this memoir, like all the authors of Dalit literature, Kamble talks about the influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar was the source of inspiration for Kamble. He asked the Mahars to educate their children, and inspired them to fight against the atrocities. He asked them not to give offerings to the gods who never cared about them. And he also asked them not to eat the dead animals. Baby Kamble and her relatives actively participated in the revolutionary activities. She was very much influenced by Ambedkar. She loved her father also. Her father often told not to work for money. Money is not the ever-valuable thing in the world. The value of money will go, when we become poor. Nevertheless, the dignity that we earned in the course of our life will be there to support us. Money cannot always give us a satisfaction to our life. Author and her relatives and some of her friends went to school. They were ill-treated by the teachers and others in the upper caste. However, they managed to survive. The author is very much influenced by the movie ‘Sati Savithri’. Ambedkar’s speech reverberated in the village, and the villagers reiterated his words. We can also see an influence of Buddha in the text.

In the last part of the book, Kamble becomes more vocal in the criticism of the educated Dalits who forget their roots and ignore the Dalit cause. She is also very critical about the educated Dalits adopting Hindu ways of life. Kamble talked about the responsibility of the present society. Even now, discrimination is not completely wiped out from our society. There are many villages, which should be brought into the light of mainstream. The educated people should work for them. Babasaheb
worked meticulously to free the society from the clutches of upper caste Hindus. Now, those who enjoy freedom should work to unchain others. One could hear another reformer’s sound in Baby Kamble’s voice. A new inspiration is born out of her voice. Education, prosperity and comforts should not make us unaware of the problems of society. She is of the opinion that the educated people in the society should attempt to uplift the less fortunate. It seems that Kamble advocates collective efforts to be taken to maintain the social harmony. In order to keep society united she insists to observe several Indian festivals. The narrative provides all the details of sociocultural festivals of Maharashtra. In this regard, Nilanjana Bhattacharya (2009), in her review of ‘The Prisons We Broke and The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Women’s Memoirs’, says:

“Although both the texts centre on Dalit women and Dalit community, Kamble and Pawar’s ways of narrating are quite different. Kamble talks mainly about the suffering of her community, the Ambedkarite movement, the Mahars responding to the call of Ambedkar and the community’s participation in the Ambedkarite movement, only occasionally picking up the thread of her own life story; while Pawar focuses on her own life story situating it in the context of the Mahar community of Maharashtra and their struggles during the post-Phule-Ambedkarite period.”

To summarize, one can say that the memoir is a social document on the lives of the Dalits in India. Now, let us study the characters one by one.

1. Baby Kamble

Baby Kamble, born to an entrepreneurial father, lives with her maternal grandparents during her childhood at Veergaon, a village in the Purander taluka in Pune district. She is declared dead when she was one and a half years old because she was not feeling well and had become unconscious. She was about to be buried. However, one of her elderly relatives there noticed that Baby was still alive.
Baby is the only girl child of their parents. She is a beloved daughter and granddaughter of her parents and maternal grandparents. In Veergaon, the village of her maternal grandparents, she enjoys good relationship with all the Mahar families. She behaves well with all the people of the Mahar families as if they were her close relatives.

Kamble gets married at the age of thirteen. She lives stress-free and honest life at her in-law’s house. Her mother-in-law was very supportive of her. Kamble helped her husband to run a small grocery shop. She would be the shopkeeper and would sell material to the customers. That was how she was making money. At the same time, whenever she had free time she read books, which were meant for packing groceries for the customers. Her husband often had control over her. She did not have freedom to do anything if she wished to do. Whenever she happened to go against the patriarchal norms, she was brutally beaten up by her husband. She suffered a lot at the hands of her husband.

She became a staunch follower of Ambedkar. She devoted herself to the Ambedkar movement. She began telling the Dalits to follow what their protector had said. She began working for the uplift of the downtrodden in Maharashtra. Baby Kamble and her classmates belonging to Mahar caste would fight against their caste Hindu girl fellow students.

2. Pandharinath Kakade

Pandharinath Kakade, Baby’s father, was contractor by profession. He is an activist of Ambedkar movement. He is very sensitive and responsive to each member of the community. He considers it as his moral responsibility to help the people of the community. He considers morality as the highest virtue and follows the path of morality throughout his life. His only wish in life was to make people happy. He loves people far more than he loves money. He is against hoarding money. He believes in earning a lot of merit. As per the custom, he locks his wife in his house. He is well aware of the importance of education. He enrolled his both the children Babu and Baby to the school.
In each of the selected Indian Dalit autobiography, most of the characters are from diverse backgrounds. The major characters belong to Dalit community while the minor characters are from various social backgrounds. The characters reveal the social reality of Dalit life.

After discussing the sociological background of the characters in Indian Dalit autobiographies, an attempt is made to throw light on the sociological background of the characters in African American autobiographies. The first autobiography is *Up from Slavery* by Booker T. Washington.

### 3.5 Up from Slavery

Booker T. Washington, born on April 5, 1856, was into slavery on a plantation in Franklin County, Virginia. Booker’s mother was a slave and his father was a plantation owner. It was the period in which the rights of an African American were completely overlooked. Booker was an educator, writer, and civil rights leader in the period of slavery. He believed that education was important for the empowerment of African Americans. He received honorary degrees from both Dartmouth College and Harvard University. He believed that the struggle for equality and personal development was attached to the structure of American life. He is of the view that an education should be the first priority for African Americans to fight against racial inequality. In the early part of the 20th century, Washington was considered one of the most intellectual, influential and moral leaders in the nation. His outstanding contribution in the field of education placed him in a tradition of black intellectuals including Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Constance Baker Motley, Toni Morrison and Cornel West. Booker’s experiences cover the pre and post slavery periods in America, and hence form a vital link between these periods in the history of African American way of life.

*Up from Slavery* records over fifty years of the life of Booker T. Washington. Washington overcomes the social hierarchy all the way through tough, manual labour, an honest education and getting in contact with decent people. Washington insists on the importance of education for the black people as the only rational way to lessen racial discrimination in the South. The book gives a message, supported by the life
experiences of Booker T. Washington, to the African American people about how to face racism moderately to live a successful life.

Booker T. Washington begins his autobiography by recalling his childhood days. His mother was a cook, his father a white man from a nearby farm. The early years of his life were spent in the little cabin similar to other slaves. He went to school in Franklin County not as a student but as to carry books for one of James Burroughs’ daughters. It was against the law to educate slaves. He felt that to get into a schoolhouse and study would be about the same as getting into paradise. After the Emancipation Proclamation (1865), Booker’s family went to his stepfather in Malden, West Virginia. Booker took a job in a salt mine that began early in the morning so that he could attend school later in the day. Within a few years, Booker was accommodated as a houseboy by a wealthy woman. He, at an age sixteen, walked about five hundred miles to Virginia to register himself in a school for black students. He knew that even poor students could get an education at Hampton Institute, paying their way by working. The head teacher permitted him only after he had cleaned a room to her satisfaction. Booker’s entrance to Hampton took him away from a life of imposed manual labour. He became an instructor there. Later, as principal and guiding force behind Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, which he founded in 1881, he got the recognition as the nation’s leading black educator.

Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery* reveals his belief in the dignity of work. He wrote “From the time that I can remember anything, almost every day of my life has been occupied in some kind of labour.” This hard work gave birth to the concept of self-reliance which later on turned out to be the basis of Booker’s social philosophy.

Let us examine the characters in this memoir from sociological point of view.

1. **Booker T. Washington**

Throughout the autobiography, Booker T. Washington stands out as a man of strength. He is very modest about his accomplishments. His life is an incredible story of success. He pulls himself out of the institution of slavery and is determined to pull his people up with him. He takes every opportunity to propose his ideas and
philosophies to all races so that attitudes would change in America. He notices many terrible things happened to his people, but remained optimistic. He believes that with education and hard work, the black people could effectively blend into the dominant white society. He gathers fame through his good deeds and excellent works, but never sought it out. He dedicates his life to his students and his race and was sure that the day would come when the black man was totally accepted throughout the South.

2. Booker’s Mother

Booker’s mother is a slave. She is optimistic that one day the Emancipation would come and accordingly the sufferings would come to an end. She encourages Booker in all his deeds especially his attempts for getting education. She knows how much wearing a cap to school meant to him and that in spite of her deep poverty, she finds a way to make him one.

3. Mrs. Ruffner

Mrs. Ruffner is the wife of the owner of the salt mine where Booker worked in Malden, West Virginia. She became a valuable friend who taught him a great deal about cleanliness and the dignity of work when he took a position in her home.

4. General Samuel C. Armstrong

General Samuel C. Armstrong is the man Booker most admired in the world. After the Civil War, he took it upon himself to find a way to educate the black race and help them integrate into a dominant white society. As a result, he established the Hampton Institute and that is where Booker attended school. General Armstrong’s philosophies about how education and work go hand-in-hand later influenced Booker into applying them to his own educational ideas.

5. Miss Mary F. Mackie

Miss Mary F. Mackie was the first person Booker met when he arrived at Hampton and was not at all impressed with him at first. Booker had arrived dirty and disheveled
and his appearance made her think he needed testing to prove he was worthy of acceptance.

An attempt is made to analyze the characters from the autobiography *Black Boy*.

### 3.6 Black Boy

The autobiography *Black Boy*, by Richard Wright, is a tale of hope and determination. It covers Wright’s life growing up as an African-American in Jim Crow South, depicting the economic and social struggles that were stereotypical for African-Americans at the time. It follows him through his youth, examining the hardships and obstacles faced by both Wright and his family. It is a story about the hardships and obstacles faced by a poverty-stricken family, and one boy’s determination to escape the prison created by these circumstances. Beyond this, *Black Boy* is a story about a life-long struggle with hunger. Wright suffers from hunger his entire life, not only for food but also for acceptance, love, and an understanding of the world around him; but most importantly, Wright possesses an insatiable hunger for knowledge.

Wright’s struggle with hungers started within his family. His family was never able to provide everything that a family is supposed to, such as love, security and acceptance. In fact, the majority of their interactions are the exact opposite of this. The adults in his family often argued with him, and prefer to have as little contact with him as possible. His struggles with his family are epitomized during his struggles with his Aunt Addie. As his schoolteacher, she is able to make doubly difficult for him, such as when she accuses him of leaving shells all over the floor in school. She punishes him at school, and then tries to punish him a second time at home when she finds out that he really did not leave the shells there but would not tell her who had. The altercation resulted in Aunt Addie refusing to speak to Wright, to which he responded: “I was conscious that she had descended to my emotional level in order to rule me, and my respect for her sank” (Wright, 110). Wright’s opinion of Aunt Addie is reflective of his opinion of his entire family, which leads Wright feel as though he is an outsider in his own home. On the rare occasions that they are amicable with him, Wright cannot trust their motives, and it therefore pushes him further out of the family. This is the case when his family is attempting to ‘save’ his soul. “The entire
family became kind and forgiving, but I knew the motives that prompted their change and it drove me an even greater emotional distance from them.” (113). This emotional distance takes a toll on Wright; despite that distance, and despite the antagonistic and demoralizing experience Wright experiences in his family, he is able to maintain his hunger for a better life, one that he could better comprehend.

His hunger for knowledge is immense, yet Wright is never really allotted the opportunity for a decent formal education. His instability at home forces him to miss many years of school, which he makes up for by ascertaining a different form of education on the streets. Living in such a hostile and misery filled world, it is no wonder that that the majority of Wright’s education takes place in similar environments. There, he discovers a new language with more emphasis on cuss words and other profane language learns how to put on a mask of indifference, and how to fight. He is able to observe some of the ways of the world, and sometimes participate, all the while never fully understanding exactly why things are wrought with so much inequality. The street is not his only cruel classroom, and schools themselves often provide Wright with this cold dose of reality. One such environment is the religious school that Aunt Addie teaches at. Here, Wright’s family problems clash with his hunger for knowledge, leaving him detached and unmotivated. Eventually, he is able to return to public schooling, where his interest and drive help him excel, but his family never supports this sentiment and makes it difficult for him to maintain his studies. During the last of his formal education, things are so strict at home that Wright skips meals in order to stay away for longer hours. With regards to this, Wright states: “To starve in order to learn about my environment was irrational, but so were my hungers” (p.127). He is never able to receive a consistent formal education, and the formal education he does receive is sub-standard and rife with contention. In spite of this, Wright always continues to learn, and his thirst for knowledge continues to grow.

Wright’s education does not end when he graduates from school. After fleeing to Memphis in order to escape the oppressive environment in Jackson, Wright begins to read anything he can obtain. At one point, he meets a sympathetic Jewish man who lends him his library card, and Wright is able to feed his hunger. These books open up his world, and change him forever. Wright says, “In buoying me up, reading also cast
me down, made me see what was possible, what I had missed” (p.251). His new understanding of the world intensifies his desire for a better life, and forces him to question himself. However this questioning never stops his hunger for further knowledge. Let us examine the sociological background of the characters one by one.

1. Richard Wright

Richard Wright is the protagonist, narrator and author of the autobiographical novel, *Black Boy*. As a young child, Richard is ignorant of the strain between blacks and whites. His mother, the only supporter of the family, is abandoned by his father. As a result, Richard had to live the life of poverty. Nevertheless, he becomes the victim of his own hunger, both physically and intellectually. His ability to write and yearning for an education separate him from his friends and Richard senses isolation from the entire black community. Maturing into an adult, Richard becomes aware of the social situation in the South and realizes that he must leave the South to achieve his goal of becoming a writer. He leaves for Chicago and becomes an active member in the Communist Party, where he learns that ignorance is not limited to race. In the end, Richard learns to rely on the power of the written word.

Richard’s most important personality trait is his strong belief in his own potentials and abilities. This belief often presents him as obstinate and impolite person. Therefore, he puts himself in conflict with his family and with those who expect him to accept his degraded position in society. He finds himself constantly punished for his nonconformity with varying degrees of physical violence and emotional isolation. Though Richard shows signs of insecurity, inferiority, and shame around some whites, his self-assurance seems largely invulnerable, and his punishing childhood only serves to convince him of his own right to succeed in the world. Moreover, Richard’s difficult and isolating experiences as a child fuel his intensely powerful imagination, his love of reading and writing, and his will to make his life feel meaningful through writing about his environment.

Wright presents himself in several different shades throughout the course of *Black Boy*. As a young boy, Richard does not believe the widely established ideas that his blackness, lack of religion and intellectual curiosity make him innately imperfect.
Rather, we find in Richard a character determined to live according to his own principles and willing to live with the consequences. This uncompromising temperament, however, contrast with Richard’s poor position in society—the low social status that comes with being black and poor. Richard starts off, removed from society and his family, to educate himself. A great deal of this education comes from his experiences—in the homes of sharecroppers, as a black in the Jim Crow South, as a resident of the cramped apartments of Depression-era Chicago. Obviously, there are some negative aspects to the character. Richard, in the due course of life, lies, steals and turns violent on numerous occasions. In a sense, he is a victim of his destitute upbringing and becomes polluted by the domineering forces working in opposition to him.

Richard remains deeply attached with people. He overcomes the negative and weakening aspects of his personality. He makes people fall into his love. Richard’s character does not exist in perfect harmony: at certain points, one trait will seem to dominate, only to give way to other traits at other times. The character of Richard Wright so convincingly has unevenness in all the traits. He has a self-contradictory appeal that goes beyond the simple biographical facts of his life.

2. Ella Wright (Mother)

Richard’s mother, Ella Wright, abandoned by her husband, is the woman who single-handedly put up with Richard and his younger brother, Leon. Ella is a stern mother and tries at her best to control Richard. But she has to travel from place to place to live safe and sound life. As a result, Richard is deprived of a stable home or education. Ella suffers from strokes that leave her bed-ridden and paralyzed. She is rather supportive of Richard’s defiant attitude toward his grandmother.

Ella is a sensitive mother. She has great influence on Richard right from his early childhood. She very sternly administers a beating incident in which white boys might have nearly killed Richard. Ella is the only authority figure to deliver punishment when Richard commits punishable offenses. Despite her occasional brutal discipline, Ella is devoted to her children and is fiercely determined to raise them successfully after her husband abandons the family.
Ella is very tolerant and affectionate towards Richard. When Richard publishes “The Voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre,” for example, the other members of the family except Ella attack him. But Ella shows consideration through her fear that Richard’s writing might make it hard for him to get a job. Similarly, Ella walks on her weak legs to give Richard a hug when she learns that he will get a job in defiance of Granny’s and Addie’s wishes. It shows that she is very happy on her son’s success.

The essence of Ella’s character lies in her illness. She represents those elements of life that are at once unpredictable and unfair. Her sufferings, in fact, become a symbol of everything wrong with the world for Richard. In the end, the unfriendly and harmful people would be sick and Ella would enjoy vigorous health.

3. Granny

Richard’s maternal grandmother is a strict Seventh Day Adventist. Granny is strict and religiously moralistic when she raises Richard and his brother during periods when Ella is too ill to take care of the boys herself. She is doubtful about Richard’s abilities. Hence, she tries to inculcate discipline in him through physical punishment.

4. Uncle Hoskins

He is Richard’s uncle and Aunt Maggie’s husband. Hoskins owns a successful saloon in Elaine. He scares Richard one day by taking him on a buggy ride and threatening to drive the buggy into the middle of the Mississippi River. White men who covet his financial success murder Hoskins.

5. Aunt Maggie

She is Richard’s maternal aunt and Ella’s younger sister. White men who were jealous of his liquor business killed her first husband -Hoskins -. After his murder, Maggie fled with Richard’s family to escape being killed by the same men. She later marries Professor Matthews, with whom she flees to the North after he murders a white woman. When Ella relapses in her illness, Maggie takes Leon to the North to raise him.
6. Professor Matthew

He is Aunt Maggie’s second husband, whom she meets in West Helena. Richard refers to Prof. Matthew as “uncle” and distrusts him by his cold and remote appearance. Richard sees Matthew sneak in and out of the house at night to visit Maggie, and he is never allowed to speak of “uncle.” Matthews and Aunt Maggie are forced to flee when “uncle” kills a white woman by setting fire to her house and beating her.

7. Addie Wilson

She is Richard’s religious aunt. Addie lives with Granny in Jackson, Mississippi. It is her first year teaching at the religious school when Richard is enrolled in her class and she makes him into an example of a sinner. Addie beats Richard in school for something he is not guilty of, sparking their antagonistic relationship. Richard defends himself against Addie’s beatings at home by carrying a large kitchen knife.

8. Clark Wilson

He is Richard’s cousin and Ella’s brother. Richard chooses to live with Uncle Clark and Aunt Jody in Greenwood when his mother falls ill because they are the relatives that live closest to Jackson. At Uncle Clark’s house, Richard refuses to sleep in his bed because he learns that a boy, now dead, used to sleep in the same bed. Uncle Clark refuses to let Richard sleep elsewhere. Eventually, Richard requests that he be sent back to Jackson to live with his mother.

9. Jody Wilson

She is Richard’s aunt and Uncle Clark’s wife. Jody and Clark take in Richard after Ella relapses into illness with another stroke of paralysis. Jody overhears Richard using foul language and informs Clark, who proceeds to beat him.

10. Tom Wilson

He is Richard’s uncle. Uncle Tom and his family are invited to move in upstairs with Granny once money becomes tight around the household. Uncle Tom and Richard
immediately clash. Uncle Tom threatens to beat Richard for disliking the tone of his voice. To defend himself, he threatens to fight Tom back while holding razorblades in each hand. From then on, Tom warns his children against interacting and conversing with Richard.

11. Leon

He is Richard’s younger brother. While Richard is the scapegoat of the family, Leon seems to be the more favored child. Richard resents that his entire family treats Leon with more love and respect than they treat him. Leon is sent with Aunt Maggie to live in the North when Ells falls extremely ill. Leon and his mother eventually move with Richard to Chicago.

12. Mrs. Moss

Richard rents a room from Mrs. Moss when he moves to Memphis. He describes Mrs. Moss and her daughter, Bess, as simple and loving people. However, he feels pressure from Mrs. Moss to form a relationship with Bess because she constantly suggests that the two get married. But for the first time, Richard realizes that “all human beings were not mean and driving, were not bigots like the members of my family.”

13. Bess

She is Mrs. Moss’s daughter. Bess throws herself at Richard, hoping that he will grow to love her. However, Richard sees Bess as simple and uneducated; he does not understand how a person can be so naive and simplistic. Bess’s sole goal in life is to find a husband and settle down with a family. “Love is the important thing,” she tells Richard.

14. Mr. Falk

He is Richard’s acquaintance. He is an Irish Catholic man who does not fit into the category of “anti Negro.” Mr. Falk agrees to lend Richard his library card, allowing him to explore a new world of literature. With this opportunity, he becomes influenced by writers such as H.L. Mencken.
15. Griggs

He is Richard’s old classmate who works for a Capitol Street jeweler. Griggs helps Richard find a job at the optical shop in Jackson. He criticizes Richard for his inability to act “properly” in the presence of white people. Griggs tells Richard that he needs to act “black” by acting invisible.

16. Shorty

He is one of the more “colorful of the Negro boys on the job” who looks to Richard like he is Chinese. Shorty is proud of his race, yet in the presence of whites, he plays the role of a clown of “the most debased and degraded type.” Needing a quarter one day, Shorty allows a white man to kick him in the behind for a coin.

17. Mr. Olin

He is the immediate foreman under whom Richard works at the optical shop in Detroit. Mr. Olin and Richard have a normal “southern” relationship until he begins to provoke Richard into physical violence. Olin, along with other white men at the optical trade shop, attempt to provoke Richard into killing Harrison - another young black worker across the street - by telling him that Harrison is going to kill him first. Mr. Olin gives Richard a knife to defend himself. Richard finds out that Olin is lying, but gives in to his requests by boxing Harrison for money.

18. Harrison

He is another black boy of Richard’s age who works at the rival optical house in Jackson. Mr. Olin and the other white men provoke Harrison and Richard into fighting each other. Finally, the two young men fight each other for five dollars. Afterwards, Richard feels that he has done something wrong and unclean for which he could “never properly atone.”
19. Ned Greenley

He is one of Richard’s classmates. Ned’s brother is killed by a group of white men who disapproved of his activities with a white prostitute. Richard eventually takes a job at the same hotel that Ned’s brother worked at.

20. Mr. Crane

He is a Yankee businessman who owns an optical shop in Jackson. Griggs helps Richard find a job with Mr. Crane, who is looking to train a black boy in the optical trade. When Richard is being harassed to leave his job, Mr. Crane is understanding and is regretful that Richard has chosen to leave.

21. Mr. Reynolds and Mr. Pease

These are two white men who work in Mr. Crane optical shop. Pease and Reynolds harass Richard into leaving his job by threatening him with physical violence.

22. The Hoffmans

They are the Jewish couple who own a delicatessen in Chicago. Richard works for the Hoffmans as a porter and is not used to new relationship he must form with whites in the North. When he needs to take a day off, he lies to the Hoffmans instead of telling them the truth. However, the Hoffmans realize that Richard is scared to tell them the truth and pity him. Richard is surprised when he realizes that the Hoffmans are sincerely worried about him.

23. Tillie

He is the Finnish cook who works in the café where Richard is a dishwasher. Richard observes Tillie spitting into the food she is cooking and is too afraid to tell the boss lady. When Tillie is fired, it reminds him of when he was fired from his job in the South.
24. Bill

He is a black boy of Richard’s age who works in the medical research institute with him. He suspects that Bill is either very sleepy or drunk. Richard is surprised at Bill’s simplistic and brutal mind.

25. Brand and Cooke

They are two of the older black workers who work in the medical institute with Richard in Chicago. Brand and Cooke constantly quarrel with each other. One day during lunch, the two start a fight that disrupts the laboratory. When the animal pens are opened, the black workers must randomly place the animals back in the cages.

26. Comrade Young

He is an escaped mental patient who poses as a Central Committee Communist member from Detroit. He manages to fool the entire John Reed Club in Chicago, including Richard, into believing his false identity. Comrade Young impresses the best artists in the club with his work and earns the respect of his peers. When he accuses Comrade Swann of being a “collaborator” and a Trotskyite, nobody question him.

27. Comrade Swann

He is a young artist in the John Reed Club who holds much promise. Comrade Young accuses him of being a traitor to the party. Swann protests the charges and demands that they be dropped. Richard eventually offers an official apology to Swann when Young turns out to be an escaped mental patient.

28. Ross

He is a member of the South Side section of Communists, Ross is being charged with “inciting to riot,” and is under watch. Richard decides to write a series of biographical sketches, in an attempt to humanize the goals of the Communist Party, and interviews Ross as part of his research. When the party leaders decide to crack down on “Trotskyite” traitors, they put Ross on trial and invite Richard to watch. Ross breaks
down when confronted with the accusations, asking for the party’s forgiveness and admitting to the charges.

**29. Ed Green**

He is a member of the Central Committee of Communists who is a representative of the International Labor Defense for the South Side. Green is suspicious of both Ross and Richard, questioning Richard about his project.

**30. Buddy Nealson**

He is a member of the Communist International who arrives in Chicago to assume charge of the black Communist movement after the John Reed Clubs are dissolved. Nealson starts a campaign to rid the party of all “Negro Trotskyite elements.” Eventually, Richard confronts Nealson about his relationship with the Party.

Let us study the characters from the autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in detail.

**3.7 I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings**

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has secured a unique position within black autobiographical tradition. The story creates its singular world and exploits the complete imagination necessary to acknowledge beauty of the work. The title of Angelou’s first long book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), was suggested by Abbey Lincoln Roach. It is taken from a line in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, “Sympathy.”

Angelou is best known for her series of seven autobiographies, which focus on her childhood and early adult experiences. The first, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, tells of her life up to the age of seventeen. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou recalls the life of her childhood days. Her story is divided into three parts: arrival, sojourn, and departure, geographically and psychologically. The story begins with a flashback to an Easter Sunday church scene in the early 1930s, shortly after her arrival from California. This scene is a prologue, which creates the insecurity and lack
of status felt by the child Marguerite. She initially recreates the embarrassment she feels at her inability to remember the four-line poem she recites before the congregation, a situation often experienced by youngsters in similar situations. In this connection, R.A. Gross (1970) says:

“Angelou opens her autobiography and conveys the diminished sense of herself that pervaded much of her childhood.”

Angelou recalls preparing for church and struggling with her troublesome body image. She is dressed in a discarded “ugly cut-down from a white woman’s once-was-purple throwaway”, which to her childish perception symbolizes her unacceptable being. She daydreams of having “real” hair and blue eyes, which, in her young mind, denote affluence and acceptability. A tone of “displaced” frustration pervades this introductory section, and the reader is immediately won over and becomes a sympathetic confidante. This beginning initiates the journey to establish a worthwhile self-concept.

Growing up in Stamps, Arkansas, Maya Angelou describes those long-ago years as a continual struggle against surrender to the very large adults, who, being Black, practiced and taught special traditions. According to these traditions, a good child dropped her eyes when speaking to an adult; a good child spoke softly; a good child never resisted the idea that whites were better, cleaner, or more intelligent than Blacks. Growing up and surviving, as a young girl in the South of the 1930s and early 1940s was a painful experience for a young girl whose world was coloured by disillusion and despair, aloneness, self-doubt, and a diminished sense of self.

There are several characters in this autobiography. Let us analyze them with sociological point of view.

1. Maya Angelou (Marguerite Ann Johnson)

Maya Angelou (Marguerite Ann Johnson) writes about her experiences growing up as a black girl in the rural South and in the cities of St. Louis, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Maya has an unusual degree of curiosity and perceptiveness. Haunted by her displacement from her biological parents and her sense that she is ugly, Maya
often isolates herself, escaping into her reading. Angelou’s autobiography traces the start of her development into an independent, wise, and compassionate woman.

At the beginning of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya is a precocious young girl suffering not just from the typical traumas associated with being black and female in America, but also from the trauma of displacement. Smart and imaginative, Maya nevertheless feels that people judge her unfairly due to her ungainly appearance. Feeling misunderstood, she fantasizes that she is a blond-haired, blue-eyed girl trapped in a “black ugly dream” and will soon wake up and reveal her true self. Maya describes her social and familial displacement as “unnecessary insults” on top of the general difficulties associated with growing up as a black girl in the segregated American South. The South presents Maya with three tremendous impediments: white prejudice, black powerlessness, and female subjugation.

In addition to these broad societal obstacles, Maya endures many personal traumas in her lifetime as well. Her parents abandon her and Bailey when Maya is three, and her sense of abandonment and her need for physical affection lead to further struggles. Five years later, she must leave the only home she has known and live in an unknown city where she seeks comfort in Mr. Freeman, who molests and rapes her. At age ten, having already witnessed callous whites mistreating the people she loves most, such as Momma, Maya begins to experience racism directly. Mrs. Cullinan tries to rename and demean her, and the racist, white dentist Dr. Lincoln says he would rather stick his hand in a dog’s mouth than treat Maya’s problem. In San Francisco, Maya’s confusion about sexuality becomes compounded when she becomes pregnant at age sixteen.

Angelou’s autobiography documents her victories and successes as well. With Bailey’s and Momma’s unwavering love and later encouragement from Vivian, Daddy Clidell, and numerous role models and friends, Maya gains the strength to overcome difficulties and realize her full potential. She learns to confront racism actively and eventually secures a position as the first black conductor aboard a San Francisco streetcar, which is perhaps her crowning achievement in the book. She also learns to confront her own failings with dignity and honour, never forgetting her guilt about lying in court and, in the Los Angeles junkyard, realizing the need to think not
just in terms of black and white, but in terms of humanity in all its diversity. She shows the power of forgiveness as she tries to find positive qualities in Big Bailey and to show compassion toward Dolores. She remains insecure, especially about her sexuality and appearance, but eventually she learns to trust her own abilities, as we see in the final scene, when she realizes that she will be able to care for her newborn son.

By the end of the novel, Maya builds some self-confidence. With the help of Momma, Mrs. Flowers, Miss Kirwin, and Daddy Clidell, she cobbles together the parents that she never had. Then, in the supportive atmosphere of the junkyard where she was homeless, she stops critiquing herself so much and becomes more independent. We know she is on her way to confidence when she mercilessly campaigns to become the first-ever black conductorette.

2. Bailey Johnson, Jr.

He is Maya’s older brother. Like Maya, he is intelligent and mature beyond his age. Though Bailey enjoys sports and fares well in social situations, he also shows deep compassion for his isolated sister. Bailey senses the negative influences of racism, but to protect himself from despair, he chooses to anesthetize himself and subdue his soul until the negative moment passes.

Bailey is the most important person in Maya’s life throughout her childhood. When moved around from place to place, Bailey and Maya depend on each other to achieve some semblance of stability and continuity in their lives. Unlike Maya, Bailey is graceful, attractive, outgoing, and charming, and many consider him the jewel of his family. Bailey uses his skills and status to protect Maya. With his charms, he defends her against criticism and insults. Bailey and Maya share not just in tragedies but also in private jokes and a love of language and poetry.

One of the most striking differences between Maya and Bailey is their ability to confront racism. Bailey explains to Maya early on that when he senses the negative effects of racism, he essentially puts his soul to sleep so that he can forget the incident. Maya, however, learns to resist racism actively. Bailey and Maya grow
further apart as they go through adolescence, and Bailey continues to withdraw deeper into himself. Even so, Maya continues to confide in him, asking for advice about her pregnancy. He continues to show his love for her as well, replying quickly to his sister and giving caring advice.

The return to Stamps from St. Louis traumatizes Bailey, and though he never blames his sister, he remains tormented by his longing for his mother. He expresses his longing through moodiness, sarcasm, and a bold assertion of his independence. In Stamps, he finds outlets for his longing for maternal affection by watching the white movie star who looks like Vivian and by playing “Momma and Papa” with Joyce, his buxom girlfriend who is four years his senior. In San Francisco, Bailey tries to win his mother’s approval by imitating the people she befriends—he becomes the pimp-like boyfriend of a white prostitute. Bailey moves out at age sixteen and gets a job on the Southern Pacific Railroad, explaining that he and Vivian have come to an understanding with each other and that he has grown wise beyond his years.

Bailey has curly black hair, smooth dark skin, and he is just all-around good looking. Because of his good looks, Bailey Jr. is able to get away with everything. He is also smart, graceful, and witty. Unlike Maya, he plays games with the local children and goes to the movies on Saturdays. He even leads the prayer in church sometimes.

3. Annie Henderson (Momma)

She is Maya and Bailey’s paternal grandmother. Momma raises them for most of their childhood. She owns the only store in the black section of Stamps, Arkansas, and it serves as the central gathering place for the black community. She raises the children according to stern Christian values and strict rules. Though she never reacts with emotion, both children feel her love anyway.

Momma has owned the store for about twenty-five years, starting it as a mobile lunch counter and eventually building the store in the heart of the black community. Not knowing that Momma was black, a judge once subpoenaed her as “Mrs. Henderson,” which cemented her elevated status in the mind of the black community.
Similarly, Momma is the moral center of the family and especially of Maya’s life. Momma raises the children according to stern Christian values and strict rules. She is defined by an unshakable faith in God, her loyalty to her community, and a deep love for everything she touches. Despite the affection she feels for her grandchildren, she cares more about their well-being than her own needs, extracting them from the Stamps community when the racist pressures begin to affect Bailey negatively.

While in Stamps, Momma teaches Maya how to conduct herself around white people. She chooses her words, emotions, and battles carefully, especially when race plays a role. Momma considers herself a realist regarding race relations. She stands up for herself but believes that white people cannot be spoken to without risking one’s life. When three nasty poor white children mock Momma from the yard one afternoon, Maya watches furiously, but Momma maintains her dignity by not even acknowledging their taunts. Though stern and not given to emotional or affectionate displays, Momma conveys the depth of her love for Maya and Bailey throughout the book.

4. Vivian Baxter

She is Bailey and Maya’s mother. Although she has a nursing degree, she earns most of her money working in gambling parlors or by gambling herself. Though Vivian and Momma have very different values, they are both strong, supportive women. A somewhat inattentive mother, Vivian nevertheless treats her children with love and respect.

Vivian always treats Maya and Bailey well, and it is hard to imagine that she would have sent them so far away as young children. At the same time, however, even when they live together, the children remain peripheral to Vivian’s life. Even after living together for some time and growing closer, Maya notes that Vivian notices Maya not out of the corner of her eye but “out of the corner of her existence.” Showing her practical nature, Vivian sees no need to focus attention on Maya as long as Maya is healthy, well-clothed, and at least outwardly happy.

Throughout the book, Vivian oscillates between her gifts and limitations as a parent. In St. Louis, Vivian does not realize the danger of leaving her young daughter at
home with a man who spends all day pining and waiting for her to come home. She does, however, demonstrate a high degree of maternal intuition when her live-in boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, sexually molest and rapes Maya. Without even knowing what has happened, Vivian kicks him out of the house immediately. Later, however, she proves unable to deal with Maya’s post-rape trauma, and Maya and Bailey go back to Stamps. Similarly, in San Francisco, Vivian’s lifestyle prevents her from actively engaging her daughter about Maya’s sexuality, leading indirectly to Maya’s pregnancy. Even so, when Maya becomes pregnant, Vivian supports and encourages her without condemnation, and it is Vivian who gives Maya her first and most important lesson about trusting her maternal instincts. Maya admires Vivian’s unflinching honesty, strength, and caring nature, despite her frequent fumbling as a parent.

5. Big Bailey Johnson

He is Maya and Bailey’s father. Despite his lively personality, he is handsome, vain, and selfish. He stands out among the other rural blacks because of his proper English and his flashy possessions. Maya implies that Big Bailey’s pretensions result from his disenfranchisement as a black man in the United States. Big Bailey does not respect, care for, or connect with Maya.

Big Bailey is handsome and vain, and he speaks with proper English, almost to the point of caricaturing a stereotypical, upper-class white man of the time. Big Bailey ruins his own attempts to reconnect with his children, particularly with Maya. Absent from the children’s lives for years, he arrives in Stamps out of the blue one year, impressing the children and everyone else in town with his congenial nature and his fancy car and clothing, but Maya feels neither glad nor sad to see him go when they reach St. Louis. She regards him as a stranger, for he shows little genuine effort to care for her.

Though he resurfaces at the end of the book when Maya is fifteen and living in California, Big Bailey has not changed. Maya learns more about him—that he lives in a trailer park and suffers from many of the same troubles that afflict other black men trying to advance in the world—but he fails to try to learn anything about Maya. Even
though Maya enjoys seeing her father’s jubilant spirit in Mexico, the harsh reality of his selfishness continually undermines his appeal.

6. Willie Johnson
Willie Johnson, Momma’s son, is in his thirties. Injured in a childhood accident, Uncle Willie lives his entire life with Momma. He suffers insults and jokes because of his disability. Like Momma, he is a devout Christian, and he acts as the children’s disciplinarian and protector.

Uncle Willie’s defining characteristic is his disability: he walks with a cane, his left hand is atrophied, and the left side of his face is paralyzed so that he has difficulty speaking. Because of this, Willie is the butt of all jokes in (mean-spirited) Stamps. But this guy is a proud man, and he doesn’t let the bullying get to him. Instead, he wears fancy clothes and puts on a strong face.

Despite his pride and strength, Willie crumbles one time. When two teachers with a fancy car visit the Store, he pretends that he can walk and speak normally. Why do you think he pretends this one time? Why does it matter that strangers think differently of him? Does he want to fit in, just this once, or is there something deeper going on?

7. Daddy Clidell
He is Vivian’s second husband. Although Maya initially tries to dismiss him, Daddy Clidell becomes the only real “father” Maya knows. He combines the virtues of strength and tenderness and enjoys thinking of himself as Maya’s father. He introduces her to his con-men friends and teaches her how to play poker. A successful businessman despite his lack of education, he remains modest and confident.

Unlike the other men in Maya’s life (Mr. Freeman and Daddy Bailey), Daddy Clidell treats her as a father should: he teaches her life lessons, tells her stories, and shows her how to play cards. In fact, he seems pretty excited to be a dad, even though he never had kids of his own. While Daddy Bailey seems to be striving for grandeur, Clidell is self-confident without being boastful. He was a simple man who had no
inferiority complex about his lack of education and, even more amazing, no superiority complex because he had succeeded despite that lack. At first, Maya thought he was just another of her mother’s boy-toys, but he ends up being a pretty important influence on her life.

8. Mr. Freeman

He is Vivian’s live-in boyfriend in St. Louis. When Maya and Bailey move to St. Louis, Mr. Freeman sexually molests and rapes Maya, taking advantage of her need for physical affection and her innocent, self-conscious nature. In retrospect, Maya feels partly responsible for Mr. Freeman’s fate, and her guilt over his murder haunts her throughout her childhood.

Mr. Freeman is Vivian’s boyfriend and Maya’s rapist. Before the rape, Mr. Freeman’s defining characteristic seems to be that he does not do anything. Seriously, he does not talk, he does not read, he does not listen to the radio—he just sits there. Only when Vivian comes home does he show any action, and he jumps out of his chair to greet her. Maya describes Mr. Freeman as a “big brown bear” (11.4).

Mr. Freeman is an unlikely father figure for Maya. Although it is confusing for her, his physical touch makes her feel wanted. Considering that she felt rejected by her parents, and Momma’s love is not the touchy-feely kind, it makes sense that she is deeply affected by his hug. His presence changed Maya’s life forever.

9. Mrs. Bertha Flowers

She is a black aristocrat living in Stamps, Arkansas. One of Maya’s idols, she becomes the first person to prod Maya out of her silence after Maya’s rape, taking an interest in Maya and making her feel special. Maya respects Mrs. Flowers mainly for encouraging her love of literature.

Maya has a total girl-crush on Mrs. Flowers. This lady is beautiful, genteel, and poised. She dresses as if she is going to have tea with the Queen, and she does not
laugh but only smiles gracefully or giggles. Oh my! Mrs. Flowers is everything Maya wants to be when she grows up.

Mrs. Flowers appears to control nature. She had the grace of control to appear warm in the coldest weather, and on the Arkansas summer days it seemed she had a private breeze, which swirled around, cooling her. In a world were Maya has little control over her life and books are her only friend, Mrs. Flowers is the ultimate role model.

Maya’s meeting with Mrs. Flowers is the first step in her healing process after her rape. After returning to Stamps, Maya is totally stuck in a rut. She doesn’t talk—well, actually, she doesn’t do much of anything. But the meetings with Mrs. Flowers start a chain-reaction, which gets her reading again, writing, and even finding a friend.

10. Mrs. Viola Cullinan

She is a Southern white woman in Stamps and Maya’s first employer. Perhaps unwittingly, she hides her racism under a self-deceptive veneer of gentility. Mrs. Cullinan’s disrespect for Maya’s wish to be called by her given name leads to Maya’s subtly rebellious smashing of the Cullinans’ china.

11. Glory (Formerly Hallelujah)

He is Mrs. Cullinan’s cook. A descendent of the slaves once owned by the Cullinan family, her acceptance of Mrs. Cullinan’s condescending and racist renaming practices contrasts with Maya’s resistance.

12. Mr. Edward Donleavy

He is a white speaker at Maya’s eighth-grade graduation ceremony. He insults the black community by talking condescendingly, but not explicitly, of their limited potential in a racist society. His racist tone casts a pall over the graduation and infuriates Maya.
13. Henry Reed

He is the valedictorian of Maya’s eighth-grade graduating class. He leads the class in “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing,” popularly known as the Black National Anthem, and renews his community’s pride following Mr. Donleavy’s speech. This moment catalyzes Maya’s great pride in her heritage and also inspires her passion for black poets and orators.

14. Dolores Stockland

She is Big Bailey’s live-in girlfriend in Los Angeles. Maya spends the summer with them when she is fifteen and drives Dolores into a jealous rage. Maya’s decision to show compassion toward her shows Maya’s capacity for mercy, despite her self-aware and proud nature.

15. Louise Kendrick

Louise is Maya’s first friend outside her family. When she is with Louise, Maya is able to escape her troubles and play like a child should.

16. Tommy Valdon

Tommy Valdon is an eighth-grader who writes Maya a valentine. Maya reacts with hostility at first, distrusting any man’s advances after the rape. She softens when Tommy writes her another letter showing that his interest in her is sincere.

17. Joyce

Joyce is Jr. Bailey’s first love, with whom he loses his virginity. Joyce’s relationship with Bailey foreshadows the troubles associated with adolescent sexuality that Maya will experience in San Francisco. Four years older than Bailey, Joyce turns his innocent displays of sexual curiosity playing “Momma and Papa” into sexual intercourse and eventually runs away with a railroad porter whom she meets at the store, leaving Bailey heartbroken and morose.
18. Dr. Lincoln

Dr. Lincoln is a white dentist in Stamps to whom Momma lent money during the Great Depression. Momma’s staunch effort to appeal to his sense of ethics to support her in treating Maya’s tooth shows both her resolve and her ability to act somewhat unethically out of necessity. The scene also reinforces Maya’s impression of Momma as a superhero.

3.8 Conclusion

As Sociolinguistics is the science that relates language and speech of characters with society, the main objective of this chapter is to explain the sociological background of both the major and minor characters of the selected Indian Dalit and African American autobiographies. Generally speaking, characters from these autobiographies come from the deprived sections of the society and are ostracized on account of their low social standing. The characters from Indian Dalit autobiographies are mostly from the underprivileged social class living in the small and dingy slums usually located at the outskirts of villages in Marathwada and Western region of Maharashtra and the characters of African American autobiographies come from the black community located in the southern region of United States of America.

After presenting the literary background to the study, sociolinguistic framework and sociological background of the characters, an effort is made to analyze the linguistic features in the speech of the characters in autobiographies in the next chapter.
REFERENCES


