

Representation of Dalit Women in Dalit men's autobiography
and in Dalit women's
autobiography

Shweta Singh

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Abstract

This paper focuses on autobiographies by Kaushalya Baisantri and Surajpal Chauhan to look into the ways in which *Dalit* life-narratives written by men and women vary in terms of emotions, nature of the narrative and a sense of family and community. This paper charts the ways in which Dalit autobiographies differ from other forms of writing, but more importantly how this mode of narration accommodates a wide range of social concerns. The plight of women and their depiction through the autobiographical genre not only reveal the differences in the psyche of males and females but also show the limits and the scope of a single mode of narration.

Keywords

Autobiography, Caste, Dalit, Dohra Abhishaap, Jhoothan, Om Prakash Valmiki, Tiraskrit.

Men and women have different stories to tell and also sometimes different modes of narration. This essay would try to highlight the way *Dalit* women have been represented very differently in the autobiographies of *Dalit* men and *Dalit* women. I have used Surajpal Chauhan's '*Tiraskrit*' and Kaushalya Baisantri's '*Dohra Abhishaap*' as case studies to highlight this duality in the mode of representation of *Dalit women* in *Dalit* writings.

With the emergence of feminism as a social movement to reckon with during 1970's a new platform to give voice to women's experiences came into being. Most of the feminists of this period were upper caste, educated women. They aimed at establishing equal economic social and political rights for women. Middle class women were trying to gain gender equality in society like right to property, equal wages for similar kind of work etc. They also questioned the prevalent patriarchal system in India. The development of Indian feminism can be seen in three phases. First, when European colonialists came to India and started raising their voices against many evil customs of Indian society; second, at the time of the Indian national movement when leaders like Mahatma Gandhi merged women's movement with Quit India movement- this was the time when many autonomous women organizations started coming up; and third, during post-Independence period when women started demanding parity of treatment into work place and at home just like their male counterparts. While doing this they universalized the experience of women without considering differences based on class and caste. They believed that because all women go through similar mental and physical trauma, they therefore share similar experiences. This perception becomes the base on which they started thinking that every woman's suffering is essentially the same. This however gradually resulted in a fragmentation within the so-called dominant feminist strand. They failed to recognize that a *Dalit* woman's experience is very different from an upper caste woman. This led to either no representation or marginal

representation of Dalit women's voices. As pointed out by Sharmila Rege (1998) in her article, 'there was thus a masculinization of and a savarnisation of womanhood, leading to a classical exclusion of *Dalit* womanhood' (91)¹. Rege argues that *Dalit* men representing Dalit women put forward their own views on behalf of the *Dalit* women. Similarly when upper caste women talk about oppression, they consider *Dalit* women similar to themselves and talk about a generalized victimization of womanhood. According to them, as argued by Rege in her book '*Writing Caste Writing Gender*' (2006), caste identity can be transcended by the larger identity of sisterhood amongst all women. This kind of theorization of experiences is problematic because the actual experiences are very different for different sections of women in society. A *Dalit* woman is doubly cursed as a woman and as a *Dalit*.

The 1980's and 1990's saw a new kind of wave within feminism. There was a rejection of universalization of experiences of women belonging to different castes and classes. This led to the emphasis on the independent identity of the *Dalit* woman. Gopal Guru in his article '*Dalit* women talk differently'² (1998) argues that in order to understand the *Dalit* women's need to talk differently it is necessary to delineate both the internal and the external factors that have a bearing on her constitution. According to Gopal Guru, *Dalit* women justify the case for talking differently on the basis of external factors- non-*Dalit* forces homogenizing the issue of *Dalit* women- and internal factors- the patriarchal domination within the *Dalits*. There was a strong feeling among *Dalit* women that upper caste educated activists could not represent their grievances in their entirety as they were not the ones who actually went through the trauma of

¹ Rege, Sharmila. (1998). "A Dalit Feminist Standpoint". In: Rao, Anupama *Gender and Caste*. New Delhi: Kali for Women. 91.

² Guru, Gopal. (1998). "Dalit women talk differently". In: Rao, Anupama *Gender and Caste*. New Delhi: Kali for women. 80-82.

being a woman and moreover a *Dalit* woman. There is always a gulf between upper caste women and *Dalit* women which is not so easy to cross.

According to Gopal Guru, the independent and autonomous assertion of *Dalit* women found its first expression in the formation of the National Federation of *Dalit* Women (NFDW) at Delhi. The National Federation of *Dalit* Women (NFDW) was launched by *Dalit* women themselves. The organization committed itself to fulfilling several tasks to bring a positive change in the lives of *Dalit* women. Measures were taken to effect immediate action against caste discrimination, and develop leadership qualities in them to help them lead their own movement through self-empowerment. In their draft declaration they call upon Governments to review and reform national laws related to violence against women, to gather statistical information on the status of *Dalit* women, to offer them protection, to redistribute land to women of marginalized groups, and to work alongside the international community on issues of discrimination.

In its Draft Declaration on Gender and Racism drafted in February, the Federation resolved to fight the specific oppression of women from marginalized groups. Apart from *Dalit* women taking up the obvious social exclusion at various levels, the NFDW asserted that "Descent based discrimination based on caste results in the violent appropriation of and sexual control over *Dalit* women by men of the dominant castes, evident in the systematic rape of *Dalit* women and the perpetuation of forced prostitution in the name of religion through the *devadasi* system".³

³ Kannabiran, Kalpana. (June 20, 2001). "Caste, the Academy and Dalit Women". New Delhi: The Hindu.

The 'Reinvention of Revolution' (1998)⁴ and the mushrooming of several organizations like the Shramik Mukti Sanghatan , Satyashodhak Communist Party, Shramik Mukti Dal, Yuvak Kranti dal etc. not only provided a platform to raise their voices and share their experiences but also accorded them a central position.

When we look at the struggles of the *Dalit* women's movement we can find a clear similarity in the movement led by the Black American women. Both of them were in more or less a similar kind of situation where either their interest was represented by others or they only had token appearance in other right movements. Like Dalit women, black women were doubly oppressed because they were women and because they were black. Though their struggle had been equal to the struggle of Black men for liberation from slavery, they never got the similar status even after abolition of slavery. Elements of patriarchy had a strong hold on the minds of the black male. They demanded a secondary and subservient position for the women. The movement which started against racial discrimination gradually started serving only the interests of the Black men. Generally it is assumed that White women initiated every movement against male domination which lead to assumptions like Black women had no interest in liberation. But this is not the complete truth as it is quite evident that they were much more aware of sexist oppression being the main victims. They suffered more than any other group of females. Scholars have tried to put much more emphasis on their struggle against racism and never enough on their participation in the women's movement. As Bell Hooks (1981) argues "while White women's organizations could concentrate their attention on the general reform measures, Black women had to launch a

⁴ Rege, Sharmila. (1998). "A Dalit Feminist Standpoint". In: Rao, Anupama *Gender and Caste*. New Delhi: Kali for women. 91. For a detailed account of the emergence and politics of the different organization and fronts in Maharashtra, see Gail Omvedt, *Reinventing Revolution: India's New Social Movements*, Sharpe, New York.

campaign to defend their ‘virtue’” (165).⁵ In this way we can see that Indian *Dalit* women suffered a similar fate to their Black counterparts. They had little influence while struggling for their rights and rightful social position.

Within this context of dissatisfaction and disillusionment, various *Dalit* women’s autobiographies started coming out during the 1990’s in languages such as Marathi, Tamil, Hindi, etc. These women writers were amongst the few *Dalit* men and women who had managed to move out of their villages and gain education. These autobiographies were not only talking about the life of an individual but also they represented the past and at times even the present of their own communities, their lived experiences both individual and collective. In these autobiographies therefore, there is a lot of emphasis on expression (*bhav*) rather than language (*bhasha*).

There is a debate amongst scholars regarding appropriate terminology for these personal narratives. Some scholars are hesitant to call them autobiographies and prefer to use the term ‘testimonio’ instead. A testimonio is a narrative in a book or pamphlet form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the event he or she recounts and whose unit of narration is usually on ‘life’ or significant life experience (Beverley, 1992; 92-93)⁶. In a testimonio it is the self presenting itself which is in a collective mode.

M. S. S. Pandian, in reference to Bama’s ‘Karukku’, argues that *Dalit* life narratives have violated the genre boundaries by depleting the ‘I’- an outcome of bourgeois individualism and

⁵ Hooks, Bell (1981). *Ain’t I a woman Black women and feminism*. New York: South End Press collective. 165.

⁶ Rege, Sahrmila (2006). *Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women’s Testimonios*. New Delhi: Zubaan, An imprint of Kali for Women. 13.

displacing it with the collective of the *Dalit* community. Bama's Karukku instead of talking about herself, gives a voice to the whole *Dalit* community. This according to Pandian is a violation of genre boundary because it is inclusive of a whole range of textual strategies.

Sharmila Rege (2006) has a similar take on this. She argues, '*dalit* life narratives are in fact testimonies, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and provide the context explicit or implicit for the official forgetting of histories of caste oppression, caste struggle and resistance'(13).⁷ She too believes that they violate the boundary of genre.

While looking at these personal narratives we are not dealing with this debate directly but the issues at large are important in order to have a deeper understanding of this topic.

Personal narratives are very different from each other. Indian upper caste women's autobiography is different from *Dalit* women's autobiography. Similarly upper caste men's autobiography is different from *Dalit* men's autobiography. For instance Omprakash Valmiki's 'Jhoothan' is very different from M.K.Gandhi's 'My Experiments with Truth'. While Valmiki's narrative is characteristic of pain, Gandhi's narrative has spirituality and morality as the main strand. Similarly upper caste women's autobiographies have to be read in a specific context. Neither did they have the same rights as the upper caste men nor the same rights or freedom as their own men. Their stories are symptomatic of this bias. They move away from the conventional narratives of women wherein the focus is on women as wives, daughters, mothers, etc. The *Dalit* women's autobiographies self-consciously move away from this dominant narrative. These writings are thus different.

⁷ Rege, Sharmila (2006). *Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*. New Delhi: Zubaan, An imprint of Kali for Women. 13.

While *Dalit* men are victims of casteism, the *Dalit* women are doubly oppressed as *Dalit* and as women. They are penalized and brutalized not only by the upper caste men but also by men of their own community. The subordinate status of women and their complete marginalization is clearly reflected in the writings of *Dalit* men. In the rare cases when the women are actually given a voice or representation in *Dalit* men's autobiographies like in *Tiraskrit*, the narrative is based on the conventional stereotypes. The comments are invariably on their moral character and the depiction is always that of mothers or wives engaged in the quintessential roles that society designates for them. The women's contribution in the running of the family and their efforts at earning a livelihood are completely absent. This selective amnesia by the *Dalit* males shows that the men are still not ready to acknowledge *Dalit* women's contribution to the family, the community and the *Dalit* movement at large. The absence of these women from the men's narratives is not only deliberate but also calculated. These men refuse to accord their women equality even in literary representation. The silencing and stereotyping of the women led to an alternative voice from the women themselves.

Dalit women's personal narratives not only challenged their absence in the *Dalit* men's narratives but also voiced the concerns shared by women across all strata. These alternative accounts openly criticized the patriarchal structure in their society thus reflecting on women's problem with its specific issues in a *Dalit* society. The hardships of these women under the patriarchal order were thus articulated. *Dalit* women's autobiographies were very candid about all kinds of exploitation and oppression that these women had to endure both within and outside their society. They also gave lucid accounts of their contribution to the larger cause of the *Dalit* community.

Dalit men's autobiography never mentioned domestic violence. It is quite evident from the *Dalit* women's autobiographies that it was a major issue among the women. Its complete dismissal in the men's narratives shows their apathy and the complete denial of violence at home. The *Dalit* men like men of all classes and castes thus are espousing the beating of wives and the general physical-mental and emotional trauma which the womenfolk have to bear within the household. In the narratives of the *Dalit* women the everyday is a very important theme. The day-to-day private life as in the autobiography reveals the dark side of a patriarchal structure. At the same time we do get a woman's perspective on things – what makes her world, her take on the societal evils, her anguish, hopes, fear etc. There is also a remembrance of the past, which, it is important to bear in mind, is selective.

Remembering is as much about forgetting. Each individual is engaged in myriad activities in his life. But what makes it to the autobiography and what does not is as much about remembering as selective amnesia. We choose to forget. While the men might choose to forget their own immoral behavior as perpetrators of violence at home, they do project themselves as the victims of caste and class politics. The women, while focusing on the domestic violence at home, might not focus enough on the complicity of other womenfolk, especially the elderly. The autobiographies are different not just because they reveal different experiences, different world-views, but also because they unravel the bigger questions of memory, experience, gender relations, familial structure which is the same across all societies and classes. *Dalit* autobiographies help us to think about the genre itself, and its deployment by the different sexes.

The *Dalit* life-narratives of the men and women vary in terms of emotions, nature of the narrative and a sense of family and community reflected in these life narratives. The comparison through Kaushalya Baisantri and Surajpal Chauhan's autobiographies reveal these differences.

Kaushalya Baisantri's '*Dohra Abhishaap*' was published in 2002. She is from Maharashtra, an activist of the Ambedkar movement and the founder member of '*Bhartiya Mahila Jagruti Parishad*'. She mentions in the preface to her autobiography that she chose to write in Hindi because she strongly felt that there is a serious lack of Dalit literature in Hindi.

Surajpal Chauhan's '*Tiraskrit*' was published in 2005. He is from Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh. Currently he is working in Delhi. The title of his book is suggestive of its content. Other than this he authored many books like *Dhoka*, and collection of stories like *Harry kab aayega*, *Kab hogi wo bhor*, *Santapt* etc.

In *Tiraskrit*, the content revolves around the various instances when the *Dalits* missed out on an opportunity or felt left out because they belonged to a lower caste and class of society. Theirs is a voice of resistance against deprivation and inequality. They look for self-respect and dignity for *Dalits* in the society so that they could lead a normal life, a life where their caste is not the prime marker of their identity.

Baisantri's autobiography revolves around the community she was living in. There are various references of her everyday activities and the problems she faced both within and outside the community. Though caste bias is attacked but that is not the prime focus of this autobiography. She talks about her family and the other people living around her which give us a clear picture of a *Dalit* community. The focus is on the way they live, their culture and the prevalent social

practices. Baisantri's usage of 'we' instead of 'I' in her autobiography shows the way the individual here is speaking for the community and hence there is a collective consciousness.

The *Dalit* autobiographies were generally based in rural India where the authors spent the early part of their lives and first felt the discrimination based on caste. Subsequently there is a shift to the urban landscape where the discrimination is comparatively less and often disguised and not blatant. Untouchability and class hierarchy as well as bias did exist in the society but under the veneer of pseudo-equality.

The nature of the narratives is an important tool to differentiate between the autobiographical styles of men and women. Chauhan's *Tiraskrit* mainly focuses on those instances of his life when caste assumed Goliathan proportions. The discrimination in a caste society which refuses to acknowledge the achievements of the so-called lower class people are the central locus of this narrative. The writer's hurt is vocalized in this novel especially when people started questioning his administrative ability and lost their faith in him all because of his class. One of the many instances which he talks about is when his colleague Venu babu started ignoring him when he gets to know that the author belonged to the Valmiki caste. Venu babu did not even bid the author goodbye when he was leaving for Hyderabad on account of his transfer. At another place he narrates the change in the behavior of his administrative manager at STC in Delhi, Mr. Shyam Gupta, whose attitude and mannerisms towards the author changed when he got to know that the former was the son of a *safai karamchhari*. The narration is thus mainly a social and political assertion against society in the form of an autobiography. Through bitter experiences and the general humiliation and hurt, an image of victimization and marginalization is evoked. The narration is not about the author's gradual rise to power in a caste-based society but instead a cry

of protest against this discrimination. The sentiment against this social evil is so strong that Surajpal Chauhan (2002) goes as far as describing caste as a '*brahmarakshas*', a Brahman ghost, who follows him wherever he goes (57)⁸.

Kaushalya Baisantri's autobiography has a different narrative strategy. The focus is on the locality, the environs, family, childhood, education and at the looming presence of casteism. The narration is not merely about herself but also her mother and *aaji* (grandmother). The focus is on the larger issues affecting women. She talks about the ordeal meted out to the *Dalit* women at home be it physical, mental or psychological trauma. So the narrative form is that of agitation against not only the upper caste men but also and more importantly men of their own community.

The picture which emerges from Baisantri's autobiography is that of *Dalit* women under double oppression as both women and *Dalits*. Her narrative abounds in instances of domestic abuse. She talks of the violent beatings her *aaji* received at the hands of her husband almost every other day. The exploitation at home which even today is a lived reality of a large number of women never found a mention in the works of upper-caste women. Propriety demanded that most upper-caste women desist from writing such scandalous narrations which might bring dishonor to their family. Such skewed logic was not adhered to by the *Dalit* women who freely expressed the shoddy treatment they got at home. Most *Dalit* male writers focus on the discrimination in the society based on class and caste but when it comes to acknowledging their own guilt and their own double standards at home, their accounts are eerily silent. While the focus on one kind of

⁸ Chauhan, Surajpal (2002). *Tiraskrit*. Delhi: Anubhav Publication. 57.

exploitation is apt and necessary, the brushing aside of the exploitation at home is shocking and appalling.

The discussion in the two kinds of narratives about family and community also help to pinpoint the differentiated narrative strategies. Chauhan's narrative is about discrimination at the hands of the other castes. The change in attitudes of friends, and colleagues alike and its essential link to the author's caste makes him bitter and question the inequalities in society. While he does talk about his family and the various social customs which were prevalent in his community, the information is quite insufficient to create the picture of an entire community and their everyday life. He gives an instance wherein he was extremely happy to accompany his mother to pick up *jhoothan* from Radhe Lodhe's daughter's⁹ wedding. While the references to his wife and his mother are there, they are not mentioned in their roles as struggling in the family and in the society at large. In comparison Baisantri's autobiography has a large narration about the family.

Baisantri is quite often absent from her own narrative when she talks about the other people. While the story is about her she locates it in the familial context. Her larger concern is to shed light on the struggles of her mother to bring them up and ensure that they got an education. In a way she traces the difficulties the different generations of women in her family faced. She talks about her *aaji* (grandmother) and the problems she coped with in bringing up the author's mother. The narrative is not merely about a personal struggle but instead a struggle of three generations which she has been a witness to. She places herself and her education within a *Dalit* context. But being a woman does not mean an inclusion of the narratives of her female sisters

⁹ Chauhan, Surajpal (2002). *Tiraskrit*. Delhi: Anubhav Publication. 17.

and an exclusion of the male. Her father's life and travails are also detailed. Her description of her childhood however focused on the pains that her *aaji* and mother had to undergo to help her grow up, give her education, to earn money of their own and to live their lives on their own terms and teach the grand-daughter/mother to follow in their wake. The details on the various social customs like widow remarriage, eating pork and the everyday struggle of the entire community around the author helps in generating a visual image of an entire community.

The contrasts of emotions in the two kinds of writings are equally important to determine the general tenor. Chauhan expresses anger and agitation against the upper caste values and customs. The despair note is also a call for equality and self-assertion. It is a narrative of pain, resistance and political assertion.

Baisantri's narrative does talk about caste based discrimination and inequalities but her agenda is to highlight the plight of many other struggling *Dalit* women like her. There is also a strong emotion of anger directed against all men not only from other communities but also their own.

The subject in *Dalit* women's autobiographies is not 'I' but 'we' as in all the *Dalit* women. The autobiographies like '*Jhoothan*' and '*Tiraskrit*' almost completely silence the women. Here the 'we' is the male. In '*Jhoothan*' the only reference to the author's wife is when he talks about the marriage proposal. His wife as he mentions received the theatrical award and refused to use the name 'Valmiki'. Similarly in *Tiraskrit* there is barely any reference to the author's wife. He mentions a 1987 incidence when his wife accompanied him to the village and an old man refused to give them water after learning of their caste. His wife was deeply agitated. The second instance is when his wife befriends a man. Sarah Beth in her article pointed out that *Tiraskrit* is an even more complex case since the examples of women exhibiting their own agency are

interspersed in the narrative with derogatory comments questioning the moral character of the ‘women’ in general. In both the autobiographies there are no insights into this character’s own reasoning, nor are the different circumstances and restraints faced by *Dalit* women in general, given in the narrative.

Baisantri’s autobiography with its narration of women across three different generations questions the double standards of the society. The demand is to bring the female voice back to the narrative and look for ways of empowerment. These women were either represented within the patriarchal set up or occupied secondary or no position at all. The women were commodified and exploited as they were considered to be not at par with men; the lack of representation despite a general sense of injustice harbors a despondent narration. While the domestic abuse, be it mental, physical, psychological, and verbal, was finally released, there is still a lack of representation of *Dalit* women. The contribution of the women in the household economy is also overlooked.

Every section of the society has its own specific concerns and any mode of writing focuses on one aspect or the other. The autobiographies which claim to give an honest account of the lived experiences also have an agenda and are written as per a structure. The discussions of the *Dalit* men’s and women’s autobiographies show that though the agendas are different, this genre of writing can still accommodate different concerns. The plight of women and their depiction through the autobiographical genre not only reveal the differences in the psyche of males and females but also show the limits and the scope of a single mode of narration. More importantly, memory and representation create a new dialectic in these two forms of narration. While men choose to remember their humiliation and clamor for self-respect in the society, the women

vocalize their concerns over a double exploitation. Representation itself raises questions of authenticity or alleged authenticity, imagination or perception, and reality or actuality. The autobiography with its claim of genuine remembrance and retelling can also have a counter claim of genuine forgetting and omission as is evident from the treatment of women in male autobiographies. This essay also shows how the literary medium that is the power of the word helped *Dalit* women to articulate their grievances, assert their contribution and demand the redressal of their grievances even if it was only through writing. The high caste women had been valourised, the middle class marginalized but the *Dalits* victimized. The *Dalit* women not only questioned their victimization but also spoke for the upper and the middle class women who met the same fate at home. The circle as we can see through this essay is complete. The subaltern in this case the *Dalit* women are championing the cause of women as a whole. These Dalit women activists are not trying merely to break the stereotypes and demand self-respect but also to highlight the differences accorded to the problems of men and women and the lopsided progress of the *Dalit* movement itself; a movement which is precariously balanced on the sandstone of double-standards.

Bio-note

Shweta Singh is pursuing her MPhil in History at University of Delhi. She graduated from Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi in 2009 with Honors' degree in History. Shweta completed an MA with specialization in Ancient Indian History in 2011 from Hindu College, University of Delhi. Her research interests include social and economic history of India and archaeology. She is currently residing in Delhi.

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