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# Reading Dalit Life-Narrative in the Aftermath of Literary Theory

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**ABSTRACT**

Over the last four decades, Dalit writing (literature of the suppressed, and formerly untouchable sections of Indian society) has emerged as an important constituent of Indian Writing in English as well as of Indian writing in English translation, and it has attracted a lot of well-deserved critical attention. This paper proposes to interrogate the strategies and approaches used for analysing Dalit writing, especially Dalit life-narratives. In the wake of literary theory, the study and evaluation of autobiographical narratives has been deeply problematised, and a humanistic approach may not be able to do justice to the complexities of Dalit life-narratives and its allied forms like Black- American, or slave life-narratives.

It is one of the curious paradoxes of the state of contemporary criticism that while most forms of writing are subjected to the most rigorous and unsparing poststructural and postmodern relativist demands of literary theory, some other variants are negotiated on now discredited humanistic terms. Most literature of victimhood qualifies for this anomalous critical treatment, and the authenticity of experience embodied in such writing is taken on trust. However, there has been a drastic change of attitude to recent criticism of Holocaust, feminist, and Black American writing, and contemporary theoretical advances have been widely applied and incorporated (Adams 2000; Beard 2009; Eakin 1996, 2008; Mostern 1999; Olney 1972, 1985). However, the criticism of Dalit autobiography has not been subjected to the rigour of destabilising deconstructive theoretical formulations, and the autobiographical voice has been accorded, by and large, a self-attested validation and authenticity.

For the post 1960s generation, that grew up on Derrida's deconstructive readings of Rousseau's *Confessions*, the autobiographical act was thoroughly drained of innocence, and the distinction between the writing subject and the authorial self has been almost axiomatic. To begin with, let us acknowledge the fact that autobiographical writing makes unique claims on us in terms of its truth value and the assent from us as readers. It is not fiction where such truth claims are not foregrounded as a founding precondition. No wonder the nature of truth that an autobiography embodies has exercised the theorists of the genre from the earliest times. As early as 1960, Roy pascal in his pioneering study of the genre devoted two chapters to the issue of truth: 'The Elusiveness of Truth', and 'The Structure of Truth in Autobiography'. However,

the tone of the book is marked by its faith—now long lost—in the verifiability and objectivity of truth.

One of the most prescient and insightful theorists of autobiography, Philippe Lejeune, coined the term "Autobiographical Pact" in 1973, to describe the relation of trust between the writer and the reader in an autobiography. In 2002 Lejeune radically repositioned his ideas on the 'pact' in another groundbreaking essay "The Autobiographical Pact, Twenty-Five years Later" (2002). For the purpose of this paper, I take the conceptual model provided by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson for "understanding the sources and dynamic processes of autobiographical subjectivity" (21). They offer six axes of appreciation: Memory, Experience, Identity, Space, Embodiment and Agency. Additionally, they also introduce three more concepts for a more nuanced understanding of life narratives: Performativity, Positionality, and Relationality. No contemporary critical scrutiny of a life narrative can afford to ignore the high degree of sophistication and expertise in the field. This paper proposes to offer a model for reading life histories, with special focus on Dalit autobiographies. Although the use of the term 'autobiography' seems to have given way to a more neutral 'life writing' or 'life narrative', it is still widely used in scholarly and academic contexts, and here both terms have been used interchangeably.

Most Dalit life writing is hoisted in the name of experiential knowledge, and it seems most fitting to begin from a consideration of the epistemic and ontological status of 'experience'. Life narratives are written and read with the implicit belief that there is a transparent relation between the subject and the experience which he claims to be his. On the ontological plain, it is this untroubled referentiality that accords primacy to personal experience. But literary theory swears by the 'constructedness' of our experiences. It would be in line with our inquiry to bring into reckoning at this point Joan W. Scott's seminal essay 'The Evidence of Experience.' This essay revolutionised the way in which experience was theorised so far. Scott refers to *Keywords*—that indispensable handbook of cultural and literary references—and quotes Raymond Williams on how experience was generally understood: "(i) knowledge gathered from past events, whether by conscious observation or by consideration and reflection; and (ii) a particular kind of consciousness, which can in some contexts be distinguished from 'reason' or 'knowledge'. The notion of experience as subjective witness, is offered not only as truth, but as the most authentic kind of truth."

With this as the starting point of her deliberations, Scott refers to Teresa de Lauretis's conceptualisation of subjectivity through experience. Lauretis contends that, "Experience is the process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality, and so perceives and comprehends as subjective, those relations—material, economic and interpersonal—which are in fact social and historical" (Scott 782). Scott makes the vital point that for Raymond Williams, or for R. G. Collingwood in his canonical *Idea of History*, "there is no power or politics in these notions of knowledge and experience. It operates within an ideological construction that not only makes individuals the starting point of knowledge, but that also naturalises categories such as man, woman, black, heterosexual" (Scott 782). As Scott convincingly shows, something identical seems to have been done for defining an overarching working-class identity (very similar to the Dalit identity in Dalit life narratives) by E. P. Thompson in his epoch-making *Making of the English Working* Class. In all traditional thinking on autobiography, the autonomy of the individual subject, and this autonomy authorises the experience as a 'reliable' source of knowledge. The "unmediated transparency" attributed to experience, and the kind of "direct

correspondence between words and things" that the earlier life narratives and their critics took as self-evident are now no more available. Post-theory, the autonomous subject, as it is, simply ceased to exist, making way for a 'subject-effect'. As Spivak so effectively describes the subject-effect:

> The subject-effect can be briefly plotted as follows: that which seems to operate as a subject may be a part of an immense continuous network . . . of strands that may be termed politics, ideology, economics, history, sexuality, language, and so on. Different knottings and configurations of these strands, determined by heterogeneous factors which are themselves dependent upon myriad circumstances, produce the effect of an operating subject. (Spivak 204)

According to Spivak, our compulsion to postulate a homogeneous and continuous cause for this effect makes us posit a sovereign subject. Scott concludes by saying that redefining experience "entails focussing on processes of identity production, insisting on the discursive nature of experience, and on the politics of its construction. Experience is always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and therefore political" (797).

Here, it must be stated that questioning or rejecting experiential foundationalism does not necessarily take us to the other extreme of radical postmodern reflexivity. It is no less totalizing than the earlier view. It is only to provide a roadmap for negotiating the claims of 'experience' in reading autobiographies. It is in the nature of a caveat regarding the immediacy of meaning and self-givenness of experience; the total self-presence of experience. As Wilkerson maintains:

> The problem, however, is that the postmodernist view goes too far in its rejection of experience as the starting point for knowledge. By rejecting any possibility that experience gives us reliable knowledge, and by claiming that it is totally situated and constituted, we are led into two aporias. First, we cannot distinguish ideology from truth, since all experience is the production of ideology. It is not clear how we arrive at knowledge of the production of experience through ideology and discourse, if not from the very experience that we are supposed to reject. (Wilkerson 272)

Here, it is important to emphasise that the experience which is mediated and produced is not by definition arbitrary or unreliable; only it is not foundational. With this proviso we may now move to a consideration of memory.

Memory or the process of remembering, we now know (thanks to the intervention of psychoanalytic school), is not a passive act of retrieval from a stock of always available, given memories. "Remembering involves a reinterpretation of the past in the present. The remembering subject actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering. Thus, narrated memory is an interpretation of the past that can never be fully recovered" (Smith 24).

Memories are versions of the past and they are created and transformed in the course of narrating. It has also been marked that memory is contextual and the time of writing, the sites and technologies of remembering, motives for remembering, and the contexts of telling, all determine what is remembered and how much is remembered. Collective memory depends heavily on activating the sites and rituals of collective remembering. The politics of remembering plays a central role in deciding the narrator's sense of the audience and his project of consciousness raising. It also decides as to who is authorised to remember and narrate. Such life narratives—where Dalit life narratives claim to belong—make specific memories

available to large groups of people who might relate only vicariously with such experiences. These life narratives create a sense of community by energising a shared memory of oppression and victimisation, thus potentializing the possibilities of political engagement.

In the recent theorising of life narratives, one specific trajectory of thought which has immense significance for Dalit life writing is the one concerned with the figuration of the 'I'. Smith and Watson elaborate four kinds of 'I': The real or historical 'I'; The narrating 'I'; The narrated 'I'; The ideological 'I'. As far as the historical 'I' is concerned, we can ascertain and verify its historicity by various means, but from the perspective of the reader and critic this historical being is not of much use because it is not his corporeality that is under the scanner, rather it is the ensemble of experiences—sifted and curated—by the narrating I which is available to the reader as the narrated 'I'.

As for the narrating 'I', "this is a persona of the historical person who wants to tell a story about the self. While the historical 'I' has a broad experiential history extending a lifetime into the past, the narrating 'I' calls forth only a limited usable portion of that experiential past" (Smith and Watson 72). It has been marked that while the narrated 'I' "is the subject of history, the narrating 'I' is the agent of discourse. The narrated 'I' comprises what is made available by the narrating 'I' through recollection. What we tend to lose sight of is the fragility and multivalence of this narrating persona asking our ratification for its authenticity and univocity. But the narrating 'I' is merely:

> An effect composed of multiple voices, a heteroglossia attached to multiple and mobile subject positions, because the narrating 'I' is neither unified nor stable. It is split, provisional, fragmented, multiple, a subject always in the position of making and dispersing. The 'I' can be seen as a sign of the multiple voices that have to be disentangled, rather than a single monolithic 'I'. The voices might include the voice of publicly acknowledged authority, the voice of innocence and wonder, the voice of cynicism, the voice of post-conversion certainty, the voice of victimisation and suffering, and so on. (Smith and Watson 74)

If we add to this the differences that ensue for the reading of a life narrative when we consider that it could be narrated either in second or third person or even in the first-person plural instead of the usual first-person singular; we begin to appreciate the shaky grounds on which we are situated. All these various ways of narrating summon up equally diverse and multivalent strategies of explication. Not only this, we have not so far enlisted in reckoning the very important factor of the ideological 'I'. To elaborate Althusser's postulation about the ubiquitous ideological factor in the making of the autobiographical 'I', we can say that all assertions on behalf of the transparency and freedom of the subject are highly questionable.

> The ideological 'I' is at once everywhere and nowhere in autobiographical acts. … Through discourses people come to know themselves and their experiences in ways that seem normal and natural. Historical and ideological notions of the person provide cultural ways of understanding several things; the material location of subjectivity; the relationship of a person to a collectivity; the motivations of human actions. (Smith and Watson 76)

In similar manner, Paul Smith brings into discussion the "fundamental distinction between the *discours* and the *recit* in narratives", being used by narratology. As he sums it: "The *recit* or simply the story, can be described as the linear elements of a history, or as the basic set of events in a narrative's passage. *Discours*, on the other hand, is the logic of the story to which the material of the *recit* must be submitted. The reality of the *recit* may or may not be doubted, but it

must pass through a discursive organisation controlled by a guaranteeing voice" (Paul Smith 93). Here, what is being underlined is the disturbing fact that although in all such cases of narration the basic storyline may be allowed its veracity, the logic of ideology and the affective vocabulary in which it is couched allow it to own and radiate meanings and significances which do not belong to the story. The narrative mode of the Dalit autobiography generally subscribes to this blurring of the distinction between story and discourse.

In continuation of our effort to situate the reading of Dalit autobiography in the context of the ideas and ways of reading popularised by literary theory, we cannot discount the immense centrality accorded to the reader. Also, in life narratives of victimhood the question of identifying the addressee and the to-be-elicited response is of paramount importance. The seldom asked question about the addressee may help us explain the tone and drift of the narrative. Among the different possibilities that might present themselves we shall first consider the primary two: when the addressee is a fellow victim or the whole community of victims, and when the addressee is the actual or notional perpetrator or the community of perpetrators.

In cases where the primary task of the activist narrator is consciousness raising whereby, he attempts to voice the anguish of a whole community against the injustices committed. Now this brand of activism or agency belongs squirely to the first generation of the oppressed, when the mechanics and the sinister implications of institutionalised and naturalised deprivation are to be unmasked and publicised. It is an act of spreading awareness about the rights of the oppressed by narrating in all vividness the instances of inhuman treatment, and exclusion meted out to the members of the community. In all such instances the voice of the narrator becomes the cry of suffering of a large mass of people.

Now, it must be said at the beginning that there is no dearth of documentary evidence supporting the countrywide persecution, victimization, and abuse of the Dalit community in India. But it would be unfair to claim that the pattern or severity of oppression was uniform across the country, or that untouchability still retains its original character—if ever there was one—seventy-five years after independence. We are now too well aware of the schisms within feminist theory regarding the widely divergent meanings assigned to 'feminism', and therefore the singular and univocal meaning assigned to Dalit subjectivity in Dalit life narratives is not in keeping with the emphasis on intersectional nature of subjectivity endorsed by literary theory. This awareness of intersectionality has to be reflected within the Dalit writing and among the Dalit readers to whom such life narrative is addressed. An acknowledgement of intersectional reality hugely deflects the expectation of the Dalit reader and it may not identify uniformly and unproblematically with the voice of the narrator.

In the continuously transforming power matrix in today's India, a large mass of Dalits finds itself in position where for all practical purposes it identifies with the entrenched power structures. In an overwhelming majority of such cases where the Dalit readership identifies with and quotes Dalit life narratives, it only rehearses the tropes of identity politics. Also, since the constituency of readers in the third decade of the twenty-first century is not at the same level of awareness and legal and social empowerment as the earlier generations, and since it is in most cases thrice-removed from first-hand experiences of dispossession and humiliation, Dalit life narratives perform a very special function of 'not letting them/us forget' their/our essential Dalit identity. As readers (Dalit or non-Dalit) of Dalit autobiography in the third decade of the twenty-first century, we must continuously interrogate its assumptions and ask as to what are

the contemporary substantive markers of Dalit identity, and how they have been inflected by the huge leaps in social and economic mobility. Is this identity constituted by a shared sense of lack, a vacuum, abhorrence, and unmitigated indignation? For if a sense of Dalithood—the subjectivity—was essentially constituted by the forced, involuntary material reality of insult, humiliation, and a denial of recognition—the very word Dalit means oppressed—then moving on means a voluntary suspension and interruption of that identity. The 'don't ever forget that this happened to your/our ancestors' complex, sanctions and cements a unique bond between the narrator and the narratee foreclosing the possibility of a critical assessment.

In cases where the addressee is the non-Dalit reader, generally the perpetrator of injustice, the bond between the narrator and the reader is of a nature entirely different from that discussed above. Here too, the readers are most likely not to have been the actual perpetrators, but twice removed from the actual event. Once again, the pasts of these readers may not be homogeneous or homologous. In all such instances, the information being provided and the gradient of narrative are not likely to be taken at face value. It may even result in identity consolidation in the reverse—identity through difference. Again, the reader's reception in this case will to a large degree be determined by the tone of the narrative: aggressive, accusative, incriminating, attributing complicity, or a historically sensitive and nuanced tone incorporating a whole range of attitudes and behaviour patterns. The responses in such cases are also to a remarkable extent regulated by the demands of a progressivist political correctness, indignation being a common denominator on both sides. The very important and active role of the reader was underlined by Varner Gunn who froze the theory of autobiography in two moments of reading. As Smith and Watson elaborate: “The first moment of reading is that of 'the autobiographer, who in effect, is reading his or her life'; the second moment is that of 'the reader of the autobiographical text,' who is also, in the encounter with the text, rereading his or her own life by association” (207).

Taking a cue from Spivak and her meditations on the nature of the representability of the subaltern, we may wonder if it is possible to surmise from the life narrative about the location of the 'speaking subaltern'? Does he speak on behalf of 'his people'? Are the people already available, or they are constituted in the duration and space of narrating? Is the narrator's voice, coming from a position of institutional prestige the real voice of the oppressed? Although Spivak later toned down her categorical refusal to entertain the possibility of the real subaltern ever speaking: “It was an inadvisable remark” (Spivak 1999: 308), she never abandoned her thesis that the moment the subaltern speaks for himself he ceases to be a subaltern. As Huddart puts it: “In Spivak's terms, as soon as subaltern memory is written it is no longer that of the subaltern—it belongs to the ex-subaltern, or more likely is packaged by the metropolitan migrant for consumption, however well meaning. … We are never looking at the pure subaltern. There is something of a non-speakingness in the very notion of subalternity” (126). As the debate about the staging of subalternity rages on, our sole purpose here is to sensitize the potential reader about the various approaches to reading autobiographies of various kinds without endorsing or valorising any one view.

Beyond these approaches to reading—the reading of life narratives being no exception—we have witnessed the rise in the last two decades of the theory of affect which underlines how affective vocabulary, syntax and rhetoric are employed to 'manage' and 'marshal' emotions to the achievement of specific goals. The application of the affective hypothesis to the reading of autobiography yields fascinating results. Then there are theories which all but refuse to confer a special status epistemic status on life writings, while some like

Paul de Man swear by the very impossibility of the autobiographical act. As De Man says in his now canonical essay 'Autobiography as De-Facement':

> But are we so certain that autobiography depends on reference, as a photograph depends on its subject or a realistic picture on its model? We assume the life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of its medium? (de Man 69)

All these contemporary approaches to reading texts make it increasingly difficult for readers of autobiography to hold on to the bond of trust between the narrator and the reader. The precariousness of this trust once allowed, changes the whole dynamics of the reception of life writings. This paper—while in no way detracting from the immense significance of Dalit life narratives in recreating for posterity one of the murkiest episodes of dehumanizing oppression in human history—seeks to alert us to the pitfalls of a reading strategy which reposes faith in the axiomatic truthfulness of life writings by sidestepping the standard protocols of reading accredited by literary theory.

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