
Inter dependence between Dalit Aesthetics and Dalit Autobiographies for Social Transformation

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ABSTRACT

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Dalit aesthetics and Dalit literature are deeply interconnected, each influencing and shaping the other in profound ways. Understanding their interdependence requires a look into both concepts and their socio-cultural and historical contexts. The interdependence between Dalit aesthetics and Dalit literature is evident in the way they mutually inform and sustain each other. Dalit aesthetics provide the framework and principles that guide the creation and interpretation of Dalit literature, ensuring it remains true to the lived experiences and aspirations of the Dalit community. In turn, Dalit literature embodies and perpetuates these aesthetics, creating a powerful medium for expression, resistance, and social change. This aspect gets exemplified through first Gujarati Dalit autobiography B. Kesharshivam's *The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth* and the first autobiography by a Dalit woman - Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*. The first one begins with the description of the life of the narrator as a child. He plays in the dust of the bone meal factory, where he later works, going on to labour with his parents in the 'cotton mill', the book presents a non-sentimental account of a childhood where friendships exist, sometimes across castes, and discrimination and abuse are constants. The second one sketches the portrait of the actual life of the Mahars from the woman's keen eyes. She reveals the suffered indignities while highlighting the internal trauma being faced by her people on the threshold of a fundamental transformation.

Dalit literature refers to the body of literary works produced by Dalits, who belong to the historically marginalized and oppressed caste communities in India. This literature often deals with themes of social injustice, discrimination, and the struggle for equality. It serves as a voice for the Dalit community, narrating their experiences and aspirations. Dalit aesthetics refers to the principles and values that guide the creation and appreciation of art and literature within the Dalit community. It challenges mainstream aesthetics, which often exclude or misrepresent Dalit experiences. Dalit aesthetics prioritize authenticity, representation, and social justice, reflecting the lived experiences and cultural expressions of Dalits. This symbiotic relationship ensures that the literature serves as a catalyst for social justice.

Dalit literature originates from the feelings of pain, suffering and deprivation and that is why it poses a major challenge to the established notions of main stream literature. This literature calls for evolving and establishing new criteria for judging these works because it is understood that by applying the established notions of aesthetics, these works which centred around the portrayal of injustice at the hands of caste ridden Indian society, are not going to be correctly evaluated and appreciated. That is why Dalit literary figures present an alternative set of criteria for evaluating dalit writings. This is based on having freedom from tradition besides having subjectivity as the guiding principle for the creation of literature. Dalit literature, which comes under peripheral, marginalised and subaltern literature, cannot be understood without going into the aesthetics of that literature which is the main pillar of it. It is an axiomatic fact that in each literary age, the writers and poets have created different literary canons for judging their works of art with their perspectives in mind. Dryden understood it in 18th century and gave

birth to neo-classical critical principles. Wordsworth- Coleridge knew that their romantic outpourings would not get recognition without the acceptance of Romantic criticism and so enunciated fresh principles of poetic creation and composition in 19th century. Similarly in later 19th and early 20th century saw the upsurge of such literary artists cum critics who provided different critical criteria for evaluating their works in right and required spirit. The same has happened in Dalit literature.

Eminent Dalit writers have been actively propagating this concept as they realized that the Rasa theory which formed the backbone of Indian aesthetics could not appreciate dalit sensibility and consciousness. They vehemently espoused the need for amending the accepted aesthetics to suit to the requirements of dalit description. Sanjoy Saksena has aptly mentioned, “Rasa theory is spiritual and the Dalit does not wish to share this other worldliness because in such experiences of beauty his losses are written” (41).

Dalit literature not only rejects established literature but also its literary traditions. Similarly dalit aesthetics also rejects the various prevalent theories of literary criticism. According to dalit literary critics these criteria are not realistic and so their literature does not try to fulfill them. It is understood by them that Indian aesthetic theory is heavily influenced by western literary concepts. Therefore dalit writers and critics also reject the Western popular theories of structuralism, deconstruction and psycho analysis. They also reject the Indian concepts like *Rasa*, *Dhvani*, *vakrokti* and *auchitya* etc. Moreover dalit aesthetics is based on the reality of human beings and the society in which they live. Dr. C.B. Bharti substantiates it, “The aim of dalit literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes. There is an urgent need to create a separate aesthetics for Dalit literature, an aesthetics based on the real experiences of life.” (95) Serious deliberations concerning dalit aesthetics began with the publication of Sharad Patil's *Abramani Sahityanche Saundarashastra* in 1988 where in the need for a dalit aesthetics was established. It was put forward that if pleasure was the guiding principle of brahminism, pain would be the essence of dalit aesthetics. This fact was later on stressed by Sharan Kumar Limbale in his book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*. He questions the triadic concept of Satyam (the true), Shivam (the sacred), and Sundaram (the beautiful). Alok Mukharjee asserts, “dalit literature is marked by a wholesale rejection of the tradition, the aesthetics, the language and the concerns of a Brahmanical literature that even at its best, carried within it the signs of the caste based social and cultural order” (10).

No doubt Dalit writings have been accused of lacking in literary merit when measured against universal criteria of aesthetics. Both Sharad Patil and Sharankumar Limbale expatiated upon dalit aesthetics keeping in mind the content mentioned in Marathi literature. There is no gainsaying the fact that dalit Marathi literature took a lead in it but these principles are applicable to all dalit literature written in Indian languages. This literature got recognition because of producing autobiographies. These autobiographies are based on pain and sufferings, are full of subjectivity. Again it goes against universalist aesthetics of objectivity and distancing from the situation being dealt with. This fact has been elaborated further by Prof. Sanjoy Saxena, “one of the common charges brought up against dalit writings is that it lacks aesthetic value. The dalit writer who visualises himself as an activist for his cause is too preoccupied with the problems that surround his men and many of the problems that find utterance in his writings are his problems also. The over powering emotions are sorrow, rebellion and revenge that are born out of shared experiences that subvert the possibilities of evolving an anesthetic which requires a dispassionateness which is almost totally absent in

their literary and artistic productions”(50).

Dalit literature has been written by two types of writer, first are the ones who have full sympathy for the sufferings of the oppressed and articulated them in their writings but these writers belong to the upper castes. Second are those writers who are themselves oppressed and so got first hand experience of all the sufferings and trauma they have endured. Sharankumar Limbale interprets dalit aesthetics in these words, “The aesthetics of dalit literature rest on three things: first the artist's social commitment; second the life affirming values, present in the artistic creation and third the ability to raise the readers' consciousness of fundamental values of life like equality freedom justice and fraternity” (120).

Besides it has been realised that the *raison d'etre* of dalit writers has to establish the feeling of self respect in dalits, to introduce them to the idea of self respect in dalits. That is why detective fiction or lyric poetry, even if written by dalit writers cannot be called as parts of dalit literature. Sharankumar Limbale explains it in these words, “The heroes of yesterday literature were Gods, it was the literature of the privileged. Dalits are absent in it. The literature of those who are untouchable, those who are down trodden, cannot be measured with the artistic values of Shakespeare, it can be assessed according to Ambedkarite thought and dalit thought. Ambedkarite thought is the aesthetics of Dalit literature” (147). In other words again it was stressed that Dalit literature cannot be evaluated on the basis of either Sanskrit aesthetics or Western aesthetics. This aspect was further stressed by Prof. Rajkumar, when he justifies the evolving of new aesthetics for dalit literature. There is even an attempt on their part to evolve a new aesthetics because they feel that the genteel expectations of the existing elite literary standards cannot do justice to the quality of life they know and render in writing (148).

Dalit literature aims at creating a counter culture and a separate identity for the dalits in the society. It does not try to abide by tradition. Here Arjun Dangle says,

A tradition is born and lives on the strong foundations of thoughts and principles and it is these thoughts or principles, which enrich or sustain a tradition. The base that a tradition gets is subject to then existing social system and the sum total of the conditions. The established class always try to establish a convenient tradition that does not damage its vested interests. The weak groups in society are tied to this tradition. In fact, all our traditions so far, whether religious, social, literary or cultural have been imposed on the majority by a handful. (261)

Dalits in their autobiographies are questioning the norms, conventions, attitude and practices of the Hindu society they are part of. By dalit writings the oppressed groups want to attain a sense of identity and mobilize resistance against caste and class oppression. It has to be understood that Dalit autobiographies are not only the capsules of pain but they are the ethnographic accounts of a community rather than a narrative account of a personalized self.

These aspects are completely reflected in Dalit autobiographies written in all Indian languages but for the purpose of stressing the aforementioned facts of Dalit agony following autobiographies are notable in content. They are in Hindi- *Joothan* (1997) by Om Prakash Valmiki, *Tiraskrit* (2002) by Surajpal Chauhan, *Apne-Apne Pinjarey* by Mohandas Namishray and *Gutan* by Rama Shankar Arya, in Marathi- *Akkarmashi* by Sharankumar Limbale, *Baluta* (1978) by Daya Pawar, *Upara* (1980) by Shankarrao Kharat, *Anta-sphot* by Kumud Pawde, *Dohra Abhishaap* by Kaushalaya Baisantri and *Jina Amucha* by Babytai Kamble and in Gujarati- *Purna Satya* by B. Kesharshivam and in Tamil – *Karrukku* by Bama. But in this paper the focus has been done on the first Gujarati Dalit autobiography entitled *The Whole Truth and*

Nothing but the Truth- A dalit Life (2002) by B. Kesharshivam and *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble, the first autobiography by a Dalit woman in Marathi or the first in all Bhasha literatures. Both of them articulate the interdependence between Dalit aesthetics and dalit literature. These autobiographies provide a powerful and candid account of the life of the narrator as a member of the Dalit community, a group historically subjected to severe social and economic discrimination under India's caste system. Both of them transcend the boundaries of personal narrative and become a sociological treatise. Both of them are testaments to the enduring human spirit and the fight for justice and equality. Despite being an incisive critique of caste system, they do not descend to self pity. There is a major dissimilarity too in them as Baby Kamble's autobiography is more inward looking than that of B. Kesharshivam as it trenchantly interrogates the evil practices of Dalit community.

On the one hand, Kesharshivam's narrative delves into the struggles and injustices faced by Dalits, offering personal insights into the systemic oppression and social stigmas that they encounter. Through his life story, he illustrates the challenges of navigating a society entrenched in caste-based prejudices and the resilience required to overcome them. The autobiography not only serves as a poignant personal memoir but also as a critical social document, shedding light on the broader issues of caste discrimination and the fight for equality and dignity by the Dalit community in India.

There is a distinct difference in the autobiographical expression of the marginalized voices from the mainstream voices. Sarah Beth(nd) has defined that 'autobiographies of marginalized groups differ in that they are written by.....individuals who emphasize the ordinariness of their life rather than their uniqueness in order to establish themselves as representative of their community'(xxiii). There is a close resemblance between the autobiographies of dalits and that of African-American ones. The comment of Stephen Butterfield, 'the self belongs to the people, and the people find a voice in the self' used for African-American autobiographies applies to dalit autobiographies in a same way. The 'I' represents both the individual self and the community. The translator Gita Chaudhary has explained the distinctness of the autobiography in these words:

Very often self-pity can be a serious pitfall for an autobiography especially when dealing with a painful past. But what makes *The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth* so distinct is the restraint of the author in delineating the past. The incidents are often described from a child's eyes, where the atrocity and discrimination in a dalit child's life find expression, but it comes discreetly. The dominant tone is that of playfulness of how innocently a child invents games to play with pieces of wood or seeds or mud or pieces of bones and skull. The impact of using contrasting playthings has a powerful impact on the reader without the author directly pointing it out. (xxvii)

Here the writer has described at length his experiences of poverty and deprivation as a child. At each and every stage he had to put up with the caste based remarks. He had witnessed a childhood where the pieces of bones, horns and hooves of dead cattle in the bone meal factory were the playthings. He mentions it, "In every walk of my life, whether working as a labourer or as a student, I had to hear caste-based remarks like 'move aside, can't you see', 'acquired quite an air, haven't you?', government's son in law and so on"(XIV).

He justifies the use of autobiography for portraying the trials and tribulations faced by him during his childhood and young age. "Autobiography or autobiographical tales portray in world the true picture of the rooms inflicted on the body and the mind" (XVI).

In the course of this book he has been able to showcase different incidents where he suffered due to class and caste but the caste imbroglio has given him much pain. He is forced to affirm, 'untouchability is the bleeding heart of the poor'. The entire autobiography has been divided into two parts: Part One: Growing up and Part Two: At work. The writer struggled hard against the adverse circumstances that were before him and became successful to become mamlatadar, a revenue officer after passing Gujarat Public Services Examination. From there he looked in retrospect to the conditions that were present before him when he was born and brought up in poverty in dalit mohalla of Kalol in North Gujarat. He described in detail about the demarcation that was made of wells and water sources from where dalits could not themselves draw water. The impurity that would come from the dalit's touching the general well water was graphically expatiated upon. He says:

Though there is so much in our literature on wealth and pariharis, nothing has been written about the plight of the dalit women who had to wander about from farm to farm and to wells for a few drops of water. In the villages where the dalits did not have their separate wells, dalit women had to beg for water from the upper caste women. A dalit woman would stand at some distance from the well and wait for some kind upper caste woman to take pity on her and pour water into the pot, avoiding any physical contact with her. (32)

He then gives example of Harina, a dalit woman who quenched her thirst from the urine of the mother cow as she could not get water from any quarters despite her best efforts.

In the second part he has described about his fulfilment of official responsibilities. Here he tried to fulfill Dr. Ambedkar's appeal of 'get educated, get organised and then revolutionize'. He mentioned the incident that happened at Kharanti village. He was informed that kerosene, crude oil and other filth have been dumped in the dalit's well. It was done with this particular purpose that Dalits might be deprived of vital drinking water but he was able to tackle that problem with aplomb. According to him this was the result of caste animosity.

The following points are remarkable in this autobiography. He does not show any rancour for the general upper castes for the indignities showered upon them due to caste. Secondly he described the problem of dalits mainly arising due to their poverty. The main thrust of the writer is to get a change in the perspective of the society. The incidents are described not from any preconceived notions but from the perceptive and keen eyes. Similarly Baby Kamble's *The Prisons we broke* provides a graphic insight into the oppressive, caste and patriarchal tenets of the Indian society. It, like the earlier analysed autobiography, redefines the concept of autobiographical writing in terms of form and narrative strategies adopted and the selfhood and subjectivities that were vigorously articulated. It also challenges the rampant aesthetics as its experiential world and discursive practices cannot be evaluated through it. This has been accounted for by Maya Pandit in these words, "There was a conscious attempt to challenge the universalist, metaphysical and aesthetic norms that had created a closure in the literary discourse" (XII). Then she points out the singular theme of this autobiography which centres round 'physical and psychological violence women have to undergo in both public and private spheres. "Baby Kamble demonstrates how caste and patriarchy converge to perpetuate exploitative practices against women. She shows the remarkable dignity and resilience of the Mahar women in their struggle through which they have emerged as the agents of transformation in their community (xv).

In the beginning of the autobiography she describes the condition of the Dalit women

who were confined to the homes under patriarchal tenets of the Dalit household. She avers, “The honour enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women of the house..... Then people would tell each other, how one Pandharinath Mistry kept his wife completely hidden in the house and how even the rays of the sun did not know her. My father had locked up my aai in his house, like a bird in a cage (5). Even the women did not give proper regard to another women because their suffered ignominy is faced by the younger women. Besides the male child is given better food and care than the lactating mother. This gets articulated in the words of mother-in law who contemptuously throws a morsel at her desperately hungry daughter-in-law saying, “ Push that down your throat, you shameless hussy!..... At least let the food get down his throat! Your evil eye will make the child choke” (30).

She points out the miserable condition of dalits during that time when they were treated worse than the bullocks kept in the courtyards of the higher castes. They lived in the neglected places of the village, where every one threw away their waste. They were the masters only of the dead animals thrown into those pits by the high castes. They had to fight with cats and dogs and kites and vultures to establish our right over the carcasses, to tear off the flesh from the dead bodies. She then explicitly states the ugly situation with these words, “We were imprisoned in dark cells, our hands and feet bound by the chain of slavery. Our reason was gagged. But it is because of us that the world stands” (49).

She also describes the discriminatory condition of the classes where the Mahar girls sit on the floor while the Brahmin girls sit in the benches. She writes, “ We had to sit on the floor in one corner of the classrooms like diseased puppies” (129). Even these Mahar girls were prohibited to enter the temple, situated near their school because it was conveyed to them that their entry would pollute the temple. She writes, “ The priest threw us out and abused us.” for entering into the temple without his permission. She appreciates the vital contribution made by Dr. Ambedkar in empowering the oppressed and restoring in them the dignity of human life. She like B. Kesharshivam disseminates the Ambedkarite concept of getting education, uniting with each other for agitating against injustice instead of just tolerating the oppression as God's curse.

Thus both autobiographies are the applied aspect of Dalit aesthetics. The theory creates the tools, methodology and yardsticks and prepared the spade work for analyzing Dalit autobiographies while the autobiographies as mentioned above showcase the abject poverty, sufferings and caste segregation with this sole aim that this diseased mind set may come to an end for ushering in a better world, bereft of all kinds of caste, class and gender discrimination. The appreciative aspect of these autobiographies is that no acrimony is reflected against the perpetrators nor the feelings of self- pity for the suffering lot. The major difference between them is that on the one hand the Gujarati autobiography describes the experiences of a diligent student who fought against adverse circumstances and got success in surmounting them and on the other hand the Marathi woman autobiography confines its lens onto the household situations and the sufferings of the woman during studies, marriage and child birth. Altogether Dalit aesthetics and actual portrayal through testimonies are not divergent in their approach, they supplement each other for the transformation of both- the literary canons and the social fabric.

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