

Dalit Women Writings: Breaking the stereotypical annotations of 'being an untouchable'

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Indian women writers have established a permanent place in the arena of literature, because they have written with a woman's point of view and have not imitated the established and stereotypical manners of writing. Most of the earlier Indian women autobiographies are written by educated, high-caste and rich women, especially queens and princess. However in their writings they have not glorified their riches instead have written about the social practices committed on women of their times and thus have expressed a genuine female experience. *The Autobiography of an Indian Princess* (1921) is one of the earliest writings by an Indian woman. Sunetee Devi (1864-1932), a daughter of Brahma follower Keshav Chandra Sen, who became the Maharani of Cooch Behar, lost her husband early in life. The book is a stepping stone in the realm of Indian women autobiographies as it depicts the inner feelings of most of the Indian women of 19th and 20th century. Another remarkable woman autobiography is *India Calling* (1934) by Cornelia Sorabji (1866-1954). It is the autobiography of India's first woman lawyer, who raged a struggle against the suppression of women. Sorabji belonged to Parsi-Christian family. She was inspired to choose her job by observing the plight of women who visited her mother. Her book depicts the gender discrimination encountered by her not only in India but also in England where she went to study.

Gayatri Devi's (1919-2009) autobiography '*The Princess Remembers*' (1975) is a landmark in the autobiographical writings by Indian 'Maharanis'. It is the story of queen of Jaipur who gave up 'Purdah' to join politics and won every election. She played a vital role in

the welfare of her state of Jaipur. However her life-story concentrates more on the personal events of her life than on politics. In the later part of their life they were acknowledged with the fact that their births were not very happy events for their families. Until then, they enjoyed the best part of their lives, their childhood. She writes, “For women, adulthood-marriage or spinsterhood implied relative loss of self unlike men; therefore, they looked back fondly to the relative freedom and power of childhood and youth”. The depiction of childhood has been a favorite theme for the autobiographers. Though every woman can’t even cherish her childhood because she is not a Maharani or born in a noble family. Here I am referring to Dalit women in India who are so much oppressed that they didn’t have anything to celebrate in their lives other than their sorrows and tales of woe. The above discussed autobiographies were written when women were not very educated even in the noble families but still they were exposed to various intellectual experiences in their lives because they were born in high caste Hindu families. Dalit women on the other hand is deprived of all this from their very birth. They live a life which is doubly oppressed, first on the basis of gender and then caste. The above information which I have provided about the writings of early noble class women writings was to provide a base to understand what differences comes when an upper-caste/class Hindu woman writes and when a Dalit woman holds the pen. Till now I was quoting from women autobiographies from random parts in India, now in the next section I’ll be talking about them particularly in the Maharashtra context.

As we know that Maharashtra was the hub of the early social movements in India and these movements were first initiated by high-caste Hindu leaders, it directly affected the high-caste Hindu women. Women from Maharashtra were introduced to education which was their path to literature. The Marathi Autobiographies translated to English are the examples of the two different perspectives of Upper caste women and Dalit women. The critical reading of the upper caste women writers and Dalit women writers focuses on the philosophy and way of life of the two streams. Domestic life, masculine influence, religious conversion, social and economic exploitation and suppression are observed as basic themes. But both of them differ in their basic instinct to compose autobiography. The open and close access to their writing deals with feministic argument about masculine influence and the egalitarian principle. For the upper caste

woman her family is her world and for the Dalit woman her community is her family. The high-caste woman writer argue for self-modification whereas a Dalit woman for community upliftment. In short, the study of these two types of autobiographies is parallel to the individual liberalism and communitarians.

Mainstream Indian literature and culture; until very recently, was limited by the marked absence of any significant representation of the Dalit experience. Although not completely absent from the literary and cultural discourse of India, the Dalits found textual space chiefly through the writings of the upper caste historians and sociologists. However, the upper caste writers, although sympathetic, could not transcend their own caste position to draw an 'authentic' picture of the Dalit life. Their 'reformist liberalism'¹ almost always portrayed the 'untouchable' as abject, submissive and pitiful, resigned to the malice of caste and destiny. For the study of upper-caste women autobiographers I have selected to deal most importantly with the text of Laxmi Bai Tilak (1863-1936), Samruti Chitre (1934-1937) which was translated by E. Josephine into English in 1950 as 'I Follow After' and Pandita Ramabai's (1862-1924) *Amachya Ayushyatil Athavani* in Marathi. After the analysis of these two autobiographies by Upper-caste women Marathi writers I'll shift to Dalit women autobiographies and then a comparative study of both the kinds.

Laxmi Bai Tilak: First Upper-Caste Woman Writer:

It is interesting to study an autobiography of a Brahmin lady, who got converted to Christianity following her husband in the contemporary conservative period. Laxmi bai Tilak was married to a whimsical poet Rv. Tilak. He got converted to Christianity out of the principles of humanity in it. But it becomes very difficult for a Brahmin's wife to live the life of 'a wife' whose husband has converted to Christianity. She was sympathized as a widow and was offered with every kind of relief at the sake of her detachment from her husband. She has to undergo terrible psychological crisis while taking the right decision and following the path of her husband. These life experiences and urge for expression made her autobiography interesting. After the death of

¹The term is used by Limbale in his text Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations

her husband, her son Devdatta asked her to write the biography of Rv. Tilak to memories his past. She composed those memories and they become the testimonials of her autobiography i.e. *I Follow After*. After Rv. Tilak's conversion to Christianity, the relatives and family members developed a kind of aloofness from him. But as a true wife in Indian context, Laxmibai followed him with all kinds of religious complexities. She found it thrilling to describe how her perspectives changed when she drunk and omitted the water brought by a Muslim fellow. Her introspection on the occasion indicates how does she come out of the religious complexities and foregrounds for the journey towards her own conversion to Christianity. She introspected about the notion of castes among the human beings and its absence among the animals. She thought that Shudras are not attributed with any kind of vulgarity and Brahmins are not decorated with any kind of holiness. There is difference only among men and women. And she decided to eat and drink from all without any caste based distinction. Such type of argument on the part of Laxmibai indicates herself as a Hindu lady becoming more secular to follow the path of Christian religion. Half of her autobiography deals with framing the ground i.e. Laxmibai as Hindu Brahmin and the remaining part of the autobiography is about how she excels in the Christian religious practices. Even after her conversion she tried to maintain all the Hindu religious behavioral patterns. Kamalabai Deshpande² quotes in the introduction of her thesis on LaxmibaiTilak, "She is Christian for the sake only. If we go to her home and communicate with her then we feel as if we are talking with a Brahmin from Kokan." In short, the autobiography becomes an instrument to reason the complexities regarding her religious conversion and life after conversion.

Her autobiography starts on a very positive note about life. She admits in the beginning of her memoir, "I am very energetic by nature and though in spirit". Later in her autobiography, once again she admits that, "I am like a rubber ball bouncing back again and again."³ The memoir traces the life of Laxmibai and her transformation from the illiterate impish prankster Manu Gokhale, daughter of orthodox chitpavan Brahmin with a phobia of pollution by lower

²Kamlabai Deshpande is an eminent Marathi scholar who despite being a widow completed her doctorate degree under the guidance of LokmanyaTilak.

³TilakLaxmibai, *SmrutiChitre*, Translated by Louis Menezes as '*Sketches of Memory*' (New Delhi: Katha Publication, 2007)

caste and obsessive faith for cleanliness. Like every other girl of her times, she was married off by her parents at the age of 11 and she becomes LaxmibaiTilak wife of Narayan WamanTilak. Laxmibai starts of as a very staunch Brahmin woman and she comes to a point where she feels that conceptions like, 'I am pure, you are polluted' are meaningless. In addition, during the famine she takes in small girls whom she knows nothing about and brings them to her home. This is in fact an elevation of human kind. She does talk about reverend Tilak and his problems of conversion but she is very conscious that she is writing her autobiography, and indeed the autobiography is considered a masterpiece in the genre of Marathi autobiographies. 'SmritiChitre' is presented as a one-woman show. This is what makes the book relevant for all times. Susan Sontag has written "Every age has to reinvent the project of spirituality for itself. Given the hordes rampaging through the country in the name of religion, purity, anti-obscenity, authenticIndian behavior and the rest, it is a project."⁴ The second half of Laxmibai's life with Tilak was possibly the most productive. She dedicated herself to the cause of women's education and fights against ignorance and corruption, discovered her spontaneity as public speaker, turned business woman-investor, published her poems and supported Christian bhajans written by her husband for Indian Christians. After his death, she added 64 chapters to his ten, of the acclaimed epic Christian. Much of her writing was done with matchsticks, to be transcribed later by Thombre. Active until the very end, she fulfilled her promise to her readers, "The day I rest forever, will be the day my pen shall rest to."⁵

Thus LaxmibaiTilak in the present autobiography has disclosed the humane elements of her nature. She has sat an example for women of our country and for the world in general. She has never claimed herself as a feminist, but her feminine sensibility is observed in every action of her life. 'Smruti Chitre' is not only a literary text to be studied but it is a reference to our history and a lesson for the poor and downtrodden. Three main areas covered by Laxmibai through her life is fight against circumstances such as, economic and social, caste barriers and transformation of religion. Before, accepting Christianity as a religion, she has followed the broad hearted approach in adoption of children of any community. Her action is like Florence

⁴ibid pp. 393

⁵ibid p8

Nightingale, the lamp of literacy she has spread along with Savitri bai Phule for the Indian women. There is a clear message throughout Smruti Chitre that obstacles cannot prevent your progress if you have determination and will to do. She has leave behind a remarkable memory of her linguistic competence and message of philanthropic zeal to follow.

Laxmibai's I follow after, is basically a life experience of a woman who converts to some other religion without any earlier or later attachment with that religion. Her aim of conversion was not for achieving any better position in her life but was simply followed because her husband wanted her to. Conversion in a high-caste Hindus life and a Dalit has different perspectives. A high-caste Hindu never converts for social mobility whereas conversion in the life of a Dalit is always to reach at a better position, most importantly to get rid of the concept of pollution and purity, imposed on them since ages under Hinduism. In the next section of the paper I have discussed Baby Kamble's autobiography, a Dalit writer who converts into Christianity agitated and frustrated under Hinduism.

Baby Kamble's The Prison We Broke.

"The Prisons We Broke" is the first work that comes under Dalit Literature that is written by a woman. It is because of that itself, the book deals with the two major problems of the society: firstly, the exploitation and oppression of the Dalits by the upper caste Hindus, secondly, the discrimination done towards women in a patriarchal society irrespective of her caste. In her A talks about the life in her village, called Veergaon and its people called Mahars. She recollects that the Maharwadas (community of Mahars) never had a prosperous life. On one hand, ignorance and lack of reasoning ruled them, on the other, the Maharwadas life was dominated by poverty and epidemics. Death rate was very high because of the ceaseless starvation and lack of medical facilities. Moreover superstitions adorned their blindness. Although Hindu Religion and Gods considered Mahars as dirt, Mahar community upheld the Hindu principles and they thought of Gods with great sanctity. Generations after generations Mahar community broke their heads on the stones of Hindu temples with hopes. But the effect was curses. They cried at the feet of idols with hopes but the Gods never heard them. Most of the Mahar population was uneducated and superstitious. Hence they believed them God created them as Untouchables in order to punish them for their misdeeds of previous birth. This made them accept their fates

unquestioningly. Poverty was another unresolved problem among the Mahars. They were fated to eat left-overs. The stale bhakris, and the rotten rotis were their common food. Upper caste considered them as the dirt in the garbage where others throw away their waste materials. Mahars had to fight with the animals like cats, dogs and vultures for their food. Thus gradually the evil practices of the upper caste Brahmins wiped away all the human qualities from the Mahars and converted them into beasts. Mahars of Maharashtra also valorize the prestige of Yeskar stick and they believe it to be their duty to work for their masters. For their hardships, and laborious work what they ultimately earn are only miseries and abuses as remuneration.

The condition of the Mahar women was also miserable. They had to do all the house hold duties, and go for selling wood to earn for their daily bread. At the day of the day, they collected all the left over from other places to give them to their children. Most of the time women had to go on hunger unendingly. Whenever some ritual comes, the work of the women got doubled. They had to plaster their house with cow dung, and clean the utensils and the clothes. Girls in their community got married at the age of eight or nine and became pregnant at a very tender age which is one important reason for the poor health among Dalit women. They lead a very pathetic life in their husband's home. If a girl could not do the house hold duties, she was abused by her in-laws. She is left with no option to return to her parents, in the fear of scolding from her father and brothers.

Several places in her autobiography the author also talks about the influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on her life. 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. Under his influence Baby Kamble and her relatives actively participated in the revolutionary activities. We can also see an influence of Bhuddha, and his teachings on Kamble;s life.

In the last part of her book Kamble talks about the responsibility of the present society to look Dalits as human beings and treat them with dignity and respect. Even now discrimination is not completely wiped out from our society. There are a lot of villages which should be brought into the light of main stream and the educated people should work for them. Once, Baba Sahib

worked for the community and that is why the society got freedom. Now those who enjoy this freedom should work to unchain others. I, as a reader could hear a new inspirational voice born with her. She believed that education, prosperity and comforts should not make us unaware of the problems of society. We will have to utilize our facilities to support and guide others to the main stream, only then we can enjoy the real value of our life.

Urmila Pawar: The Weave of Life

Urmila Pawar is a literary personality, known for her short story writings in Marathi literature. She was born and brought up in Kokan region of Maharashtra state and today is known as a feminist writer and leader of Women's liberation movement. As a Dalit writer, she has established herself after Daya Pawar, Baby Kamble and Shantabai Gokhale as the prominent voice of Dalit literature. Her memoir 'Aaydan', which was published in the year 2003, was translated by Dr. Maya Pandit as *The Weave of my life: A Dalit woman's Memoir*. 'Aaydan' means weaving of cane baskets. It was the main economic activity of the Mahar community. There is another meaning to the word Aaydan; it is utensils used by them. The Mahar community was staying in the central location of the village, as they could be useful to the upper caste people for their sanitation related works as well as to protect themselves from the attacks from outsiders. Even Mahar people were busy in weaving of basket before plastic entered in their life. Pawar writes, "My mother used to weave Aaydan and I was writing this book, both were activities of creation of thought and practical reality of life."⁶Pawar narrates the incident in her memoir like this, "Aye was weaving her baskets as usual. She did not see me when I crossed her and entered the house. Her face looked worried. She was engrossed in her own thoughts and her fingers flew over the basket. Going to her, I told her about the scholarship and held the twelve rupees before her. Suddenly her face lit up with a sunny smile and eyes sparkled."⁷

Pawar was much sensitive about her caste as well as her poverty so during school period onwards her conscious mind was aware of the limitations of person of lower caste and meaning

⁶PawarUrmilaAaydan tran.by Dr. Maya Pandit as *The weave of my life: a Dalit Woman's Memoir*, pub.Katha, 2007. P1

⁷ibid p 91

of poverty not described in the books, but in reality. As she writes, “The upper caste girls always used words like ‘Ladu’, ‘Modak’, ‘karanjya’, ‘Puranpolya’. They brought such novel items in their tiffin boxes as well as at times we went on excursions. However, I never asked myself the stupid question, why we do not prepare such dishes at home? We were aware, without anybody telling us, that we were born in a particular caste and in poverty, and that we had to live accordingly.”⁸

The other important reference about the community living and exploitation of the women is seen in their food preparations at home. It is very evident from the memoir that separate food preparations were done for men and women and particularly the daughter-in-law is exploited up to maximum level. Pawar as a feminist and a Dalit woman has highlighted this issue when she writes, “When the men folk went out and women and girls remained at home, they dined at kata. A small quantity poured in water and cooked as a soup, with chili powder, salt and a piece of mango or maul. This was called sagar! Women ate their rice with the watery dish. The song we used to sing:” Hey what is that funny” dug noise, what is the foul smell spreading all over? Well, what they cooked was fish water! Someone has had a bellyful and how! She wears a short sarees, down to the feet now to hide what ‘trickling down from her butt.” This sagar used to be the regular diet for daughter-in-laws.⁹ Conversion was the main activity in those days in the days of Buddha - Ambedkar revolution of change in religious faith. After Govindadada’s conversion to Buddhism and keeping portrait of Dr. Ambedkar on the wall, the signs of change were visible even in the rituals of marriage and other religious activities. As Urmila mentions, “The older rituals to mark birth, marriage and death were given up and new ones gradually came to be finalized, according to Buddhist religion.”¹⁰

Pawar has given very minute details of oppression and exploitations of girl child and women. Sometimes the humiliation is so much that it is biting to the reader with his/her sensibility. She describes in this following quotation both the insult and hunger of the girl child. As Pawar narrates the incident, “Once, I went to attend wedding at my sister-in-law’s place, along with two of my nieces. However, when we three spout girls set down to eat and begun

⁸ibid p 93

⁹ ibid p 100

¹⁰ibid p 111

asking rice repeatedly, the cook got angry, 'Whose daughters are these anyway? 'He burst out. 'They are eating like monsters' then someone answered 'they are from our'' Sushi's family! Daughters of Arjun master!' On hearing this, the host came forward. 'Oh! Are they? All right, all right let them eat as much as they want! Serve them well!' The cook returned with more rice but being called monster was not easy to digest and we politely declined.''¹¹

She has published her first storybook 'sixth finger' and Jagdish More has published it through 'Samvadini Publication'. In the publication function Shri Sushilkumar Shinde, Arun Sadhu, Shri Nerurkar, Chhaya Datar and Shri Bhalchandra Mungekar were remained present. However, at home front her position was not comfortable as Harischandra constantly felt underestimated himself compared to Urmils' a success. She narrates this agony like this, "His attitude towards me was full of contradictions. On the one hand, he was proud of my writing, he admitted to his friends and relatives. However, on the other, he immensely resented my being recognized as a writer, my speaking in public programmers and my emerging as a figure in the public domain.'"¹²

At the end of her memoir she concludes with pathetic ritual of death ceremony in Maharashtra, where a widow has to break her 'Mangalsutra' and her bangles and with the left toe of the husband she has to remove her wifhood i.e. kumkum tilak. Urmila opposed this ritual and for Prof. Ramakant Jadhav could pass the resolution of Buddha Panchayatan on 14 April 2002 about removal and breaking of Mangalsutra by the widow. She sums up with the question of her own 'Aaydan' but this is a harsh reality of life if someone accepts or not. In the words of Sonali Rode, "UrmilaPawar'sAaydan describes her long journey from Kokan to Mumbai bringing the struggle of three generations for a Dalit modernity about which readers have hitherto heard so little.'"¹³

'The Weave of My life' written in a realistic fictional mode, it is characterized by an honest, frank, and bold articulation of a Dalit woman's experiences and may easily be compared

¹¹ ibid p 117

¹² ibid p 246

¹³ Rode Sonali, International Research Journal, vol, 3 and4, 2008.

with Afro-American women's narrative. The English translation by Maya Pandit is quite successful in bringing out the ethnic flavor of the Marathi original. In the concluding paragraphs of her Memoir Urmila Pawar writes, "Life has taught me many things, showed me so such. It has also lashed it me till bled, I don't know how much longer I am going to live, nor do I know in what form life is going to confront me let it came in any form; I am ready to face it stoically. This is what my life has taught me. This is my life and that is me."¹⁴

Maya Pandit's translation succeeds for a great extent in conveying the flavor of this speech and to earth humor of Pawar's writing style she retains the use of Marathi kinship terms that are part of family relationships and gives us a glossary to their meaning. It is always challenging to linguistically diverse text from one language to another and here it has been done with considerably. Pawar's autobiography has been much acclaimed in Marathi literary circles. It has won prides currently in its third edition. However, she has been criticized for her association with upper-class woman's group and open exposition of Dalit Patriarchy.

The above discussion very clearly prove the fact that although Dalit women were not is as privileged condition as the high-caste women and led a doubly oppressed lives but still their efforts to change their fate was commendable. They bravely fought against all odds of life to establish such a position of life and thus opening gates for their future generations.

¹⁴Neelanjana Bhattacharya, A comparative study of Baby Kamble's Prisons they Broke, and The Weave of my life both trans. by Maya Pandit, 2010

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Shantabai Kamble's *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* published as a complete book in 1986 but presented to readers and television audiences in serial form through the early 1980s, is considered the first autobiographical narrative by Dalit woman writer.
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