



Shaping of the Consciousness in Childhood: A Study of Dalit Autobiographies

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Abstract:

Although the genre of autobiography traces the major events of an individual's life, the Dalit autobiography often stresses on the childhood. The Dalit child becomes an important motif as s/he struggle to make sense of the complexities of the caste based divisions and these anxieties shape a kind of awareness of being the 'other'.

Key words- Autobiography, Childhood, Otherness, Dalit,

The genre of Autobiography aims to give to its readers an insight of an individual's life. Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story

of his personality” (Lejeune 4). In the West, Autobiographies tend to celebrate one’s own self and can be traced as far back as St. Augustine’s *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. The Indian Autobiography developed much later and does not deal with the ‘self’ completely. According to Raj Kumar, Indian autobiographies are complex because they deal with the issues of “caste, class, religion and gender” (Kumar 44). Post-independence, India witnessed the rise of Dalit autobiographies as ‘untouchability’ was abolished and education was slowly being extended to the Dalits. This paper will look at some Dalit narratives and study the shaping of ‘consciousness of being other’ especially in the childhood. Further, the paper shall investigate the impact of this consciousness on the adult life and the aim of writing about one’s (Dalit) life.

In order to understand the structure and form of the Dalit Autobiography, it is important to define ‘Dalit’. Constantly misunderstood, the word Dalit has been subject to many interpretations and the definition has evolved over the years. Namdeo Dhasal, a famous Dalit poet, is one of the first poets who defined the word ‘Dalit’ by including ‘economically oppressed’ sections of the society. Raj Kumar defines ‘Dalit’ as the “existential conditions of a group of people who are subjected to all forms of oppression, that is, social, political, economic, cultural and religious” (Kumar 146). Thus, it does not come as a surprise to the readers that the term ‘Dalit’ is inclusive and includes labourers and women, regardless of their caste and class. Therefore, the emergence of Dalit literature is important as it challenges the hegemony of the ‘Hindu’ literature and its age old religious institutions. Dalit writers make a conscious effort not to overturn the power structure but to re-structure and re-construct them, an ideology propagated by B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar launched the Samata Sainik Dal with the aim of giving equal opportunity to the suppressed section of the society to rise in the social order. Keeping the ideology of the Dalit movement and literature, the genre of Autobiography has to be read and scrutinised in a different

light. While the upper caste (mainly men) Indian autobiographies tends to celebrate one's own 'self' and life, the Dalit autobiography does not have an individual 'self'. Study of the various autobiographies in this paper will point to the fact that Dalit autobiographies are based on the 'self' and the community. This is because the author is aware of the shared emotions of suffering, oppression and deprivation. Therefore, in many 'Dalit' autobiographies, the 'I' representing the self becomes 'We', hinting at the self and sociological analysis. Hence, Raj Kumar in his book suggests that Dalit autobiographies "emphasise complex interpersonal relationship and a sense of solidarity concerning a much wider spectrum of issues, relating to social relations at the micro-level encompassing village, family, caste, peer groups, school factory, urban streets, slums and the like" (Kumar 151).

However, it is important to look for in Dalit autobiographies, the moment of the shaping of the consciousness of being the 'other'. One has to keep in mind that it does not have exact date or time but rather a gradual understanding of the 'otherness'. The shared sentiment of being denied or oppressed is not a moment of epiphany which strikes the authors in the adult life but careful, step by step analysis of their life since birth. Childhood, which William Blake refers to as the 'age of innocence' is marred by the harsh experiences of the reality. Like Blake's little 'Chimney Sweeper' who is conscious of the suffering cries 'weep', Dalit writing traces the agony (physical and mental) since the childhood. In Autobiography, memory and history play a very important role. One has the tendency to forget, so an attempt is made to recollect the same. Another aspect of the genre is the need to reinvent the memory. If recollection and reinvention are the tools employed to write one's autobiography, the author might face the charge of false representation. However, the reader has to remember that not all memories and events of an

individual's life can be put in to one chapter or book. Therefore, the author has to (even compelled to) select and represent the memory in a truthful manner. In that sense the term 'reinvention' does not imply fabrication but artistic representation. On the other hand the element of 'history' has to be studied keeping in mind the role of The Dalit Movement. Many Dalit authors believe that Non-Dalit authors have either misrepresented or give little weight to the suffering of the Dalits. Sharan kumar Limbale and OmprakashValmiki have discussed 'Dalit Aesthetics' and the role of a Dalit writer. They suggest that life and literature have to be linked. Therefore, all the superstitions, religious practices, poverty, oppression and suffering have to be understood in the social context. Secondly, they suggest that ideas have to be put to action. Reading about of Dalit life is not enough; if one has to bring changes, one has to take action. The artist's inspiration, according to Limbale, should be from his/ her own experiences which should be relevant at all times. Hence, Dalit writers believe that non-Dalit writers cannot do justice and it is only them who would "attempt to be true to their lived experiences and feel that their visions and responses must be translated into art honestly, in its raw undistilled form, without euphemism" (Kumar 148).

Keeping the above said in mind, it is then important to look at the representation of childhood in Dalit autobiographies. The childhood of a Dalit author is plagued by many social evils. Be it in terms of food, clothing, housing or education the Dalit child suffers in every quarter of his/ her life. A close examination of authors like Vasant Moon, OmprakashValmiki and Sheoraj Singh Bechain will bring out the life lived by these authors as a child in an Indian society. Born in 1932, Vasant Moon titled his autobiography as *Vasti*. 'Vasti' is a Marathi term which means 'Bustee' in Hindi and translates into 'urban slums'. However, 'Vasti' comes to signify the 'Neighbourhood' of Vasant Moon. When the autobiography was translated into

English by Eleanor Zelliot, she added the title *Growing Up an Untouchable in India*. The title of this text comes to signify the shared sentiments of ‘we’ and ‘us’. Although, Moon does dwell into the graphic details of hunger and poverty, he also introduces the readers to a society which loves sports like wrestling and ‘Hututu’ (kabaddi). Moon opens his autobiography not with a personal account but with the recent history of his whole community itself. He describes the houses, the lanes and the drains which designate the boundary of the entire neighbourhood. He ends this description with the collective experience of himself as a child with others of the community lying on the mats looking at stars. An important feature of this autobiography is the interplay and display of multiple emotions together. When Moon is nine years old, his father deserts their family. In order to support the family his mother, Purnabai, does odd jobs like cooking in the Parsi family. Moon describes that when he would come back home after spending time with his friends, it would nearly be dark and his mother had not returned from work. While the brother and sister would sleep on an empty stomach waiting for the mother to feed them, the neighbour would give them some ‘Bhakri’ and coconut ‘chutney’. It is emotions like these that Moon feels nostalgic about.

Further, when Moon describes the state of their house to the readers, he does not sound angry or embarrassed. Instead, the reader comes to know of the beauty of the design of Moon’s house which would allow the house to remain cool in summers and warm during winters. However, one cannot overlook the graphic details of hunger and poverty in the text. Moon realizes that his emancipation lies in education. He works hard in school and even excels. But the financial struggles burden his household as his mother is not able to make ends meet. There was money either for the school fees or supplying two meals a day for the family. The reader notices

this when SamataSainik Dal comes to the rescue of his family by supplying 'hot' meals for his family. Moon is careful to observe that the families providing food for the Moon family would never give 'stale' food or leftovers. This again points to the commitment to one's community and protecting the self-esteem of all members. Another important aspect of Moon's autobiography is the growth of the Ambedkarite movement seen from the eyes of a child. In chapter 10 titled, "Parade of Lions and Tigers", Moon describes the formation, the spreading and influence of the SamataSainik Dal. Formed in 1938, Moon tells his reader that he "started going to the Dal from the third standard onwards" (Moon 64). Further we are told that the flag of the Dal had a 'white sun' in the symbolized Ambedkar. Moon describes the meeting where the flag was raised on a pole while singing the 'flag songs. Moon describes the experience as "extremely romantic" where everyone, from an adult to a child would repress hunger and thirst. The Ambedkarite Movement deeply influenced Vasant Moon as a child, who till his death employed its philosophy in the establishment and working of several Dalit organisations.

As Moon grew up he became extremely careful about his studies and worked as a Deputy Accountant General in Post and Telegraph office before he had completed his Masters degree. However, this autobiography has less to do with the celebration of the author's own life. The text concerns itself mainly with the community in which Moon grew up, how they helped him, influenced him and even suffered with him. It is in very minute detail of the text that the reader becomes aware of the deep sense of love and faith Moon had for his community. In Chapter 2, Moon talks about the role of the earthen pot in every household. The earthen pot would cool the water during summers and gave respite to everyone. If by any mishap should the pot break, the neighbours would give water out of their pot till the family is able to replace the same. In this manner, the earthen pot can be seen as a metaphor for the entire community which

protects and nourishes each other from the heat, which is, suffering. Vasant Moon ends his autobiography by feeling nostalgic about his old community. He longs to go back to the same community of small 'earthen' houses and experience the love of his neighbours. However, one can sense a tone of melancholy in Moon's last few lines. Raj Kumar suggests that "with changing times... Moon has marked that the concept of community is missing" (Kumar 195). Moon seems to be troubled by the current state of the Dalit movement for he senses the lack of unity among its participants. Hence, he stresses the importance of community in his autobiography, so that the new generation can display the same love, faith, trust and devotion to the Dalit community as he witnessed in his childhood. Thus childhood experiences are very important for Vasant Moon as the struggles and hardships along with the movement of resistance become central to his ideology in his adult life. While Moon works for the community he belongs to, he celebrates his past for significant lessons in communal harmony and love for a better and more advantageous future, not only for himself but for the entire Dalit community.

Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography offers a disturbing and graphic imagery of the violence committed against the Dalits. Valmiki was born in 1950 in the Barla village in Muzaffar Nagar district in Uttar Pradesh. Uttar Pradesh, a state in North India, is still known for its violence against the Dalits. In 2014, two Dalit girls were raped and hanged in Badaun district which was treated callously by the police and political authorities. Unlike Vasant Moon, Valmiki paints a grim picture of his childhood where he faced difficulties in every quarter of his life. Valmiki was born into a caste which was formerly known as the 'Chuhra' or 'Bhangi'. The main occupation of this caste was to sweep the village roads, pick up human and animal faeces and dispose of the carcass of dead animals. The experiences of Valmiki as a child, in the

‘ChuhraBasti’ range from the segregation of the village to the mosquito ridden and rain water laden streets of his village. Valmiki painfully remembers the ‘mangy skin’ and ‘muddy water’ mixed with animal faeces during the monsoon season. This scene is in direct contrast with Vasant Moon’s account as Moon describes how the mothers would happily send their children out in the rain and watch them dance.

The biggest obstacle for Valmiki’s father is to materialise his dream of a better future for his son. He struggles hard to get his son admission in a primary school. Despite the fact that ‘untouchability’ was banned by the Indian constitution in 1955, many Dalit parents could not get the children listed in school. Even after admission, the discrimination faced by the Dalit children was immense. Valmiki narrates an experience of life which was lived by him almost daily:

The headmaster had pounced on my neck. The pressure of his fingers was increasing. As a wolf grabs a lamb by the neck, he dragged me out of the class and threw me on the ground. He screamed: ‘Go sweep the whole playground...Otherwise I will shove chillies up your arse and throw you out of the school.

(Valmiki 5)

It happens by chance that Valmiki’s father visits the school and sees the broom in his tearful son’s hand. His father is shocked to see Valmiki being shoved into the same profession by the hegemonic upper caste school teacher and students which he wants his son to escape in the first place. Valmiki painfully remembers the agony and angst in his father’s eyes when he says, “But remember this much, Master... This Chuhreka will study right here... In this school. And not just him, but there will be more coming after him.” (Valmiki 6). These were the living

nightmares Valmiki grew up with. Valmiki even felt pressure from his own community not because of the lack of support but out of the immense burden of performing in order to live up to the expectations they had from him. Nevertheless, he is critical of the society in which he has grown up because he calls it 'barbaric' and a 'cruel' civilization. Even at the end of his autobiography Valmiki describes an incident in the train where a fellow officer's wife asked his wife their caste. To this Valmiki gives a straight answer, 'Bhangi', but accompanied by the statement that such instances have "stung not just my body but also my heart" (Valmiki 133), right from his childhood days. As seen in Valmiki's autobiography, the instances of childhood have stuck to his mind. The wall which divided his slums from the village is etched into his mind. The metaphor comes up repeatedly in the text. Also the title, *Joothanis* very significant. 'Joothan' means the leftovers on a plate or waste/ stale food. The word acquires symbolic meaning when the eater of the leftover is not the original one. Moreover, 'Jootha' carries Hindu ritualistic weight which polluted or impure. An example of this is seen during the examinations, Dalit children could not use cups to drink water so that the 'Tyagi' teachers and boys do not get offended. Here again the reader sees that Valmiki is not only talking about himself or his family alone. It is the community which becomes the centre of the issue as the entire 'Chuhra' caste was the victim of 'Joothan'.

Next autobiography which reflects the struggle of a child in oppressive conditions is by Sheoraj Singh Bechain called *Mera Bachpan Mere Kandhon Par*. Originally written in Hindi, Sheoraj Singh gives an apt title to his autobiography. Born in the 'Jatav' community, a Dalit community from eastern Uttar Pradesh, the main occupation of this community was to dispose dead animals and tanning. Since, the income was not regular; people of the community were

forced to pick up odd jobs like mending shoes or working in fields. Bechain's struggle began right from the time he was a toddler as his father suddenly passed away. His mother remarries and leaves her children (including Bechain) to his visually impaired Grandfather and Uncle. One thing Bechain never gives up on is his quest for education. In order to support his education and household, Bechain does several odd jobs such as shoe-shining, bonded labourer at a brick kiln and doing chores for his teacher. However, unlike the community of Moon or Valmiki, Bechain sometimes faces opposition from his own community. His stepfather burns his books in a fit of jealousy. Nevertheless, he continues his struggle and passes his school exam. Thus, despite the fact that Bechain's childhood is marred by many struggles and materialistic deprivations, it also reflects the unsaid stories of many communities forced to live in exclusion.

The autobiographies seen so far have many points in common. First, the childhood is defined by the strong social forces known as 'caste laws'. One can say that the caste laws are invading and pervasive. They are the invisible yet destructive forces whose damaging effects are witnessed yet not recorded. To put it simply, if an upper caste individual declares that he/ she is not a 'casteist', it is a privilege they are unaware of. As for the Dalit community, the caste laws are invasive as it not only defines the occupation but also the physical appearance of the body, their house, clothing, food habits and ritualistic beliefs, all which together define the 'Dalit' identity. In the autobiographies discussed above, the childhood is governed by these regulations, be it their 'earthen houses', 'thatched roofs', 'mud floors', 'eating leftovers' or even going to sleep on an empty stomach. Secondly, childhood experiences define the sentiments one has for the community when the individual grows up. This is the reason that if not all then most of the Dalit autobiographies are marked by a sense of community. Hence, it is not the 'individual self' but the 'community' that one encounters. Another explanation for this sentiment has suggested

by Sudhir Kakar, the child psychologist. Kakar studied the term ‘Jati’, not as suggested by the Hindu concept of ‘varna’, that is the four social divisions as per the Hindu Traditions, but as “caste in all the immediacy of daily social relations and occupational specializations” (Kakar 146). From this notion, Kakar tries to define the relationship of the child to its surrounding and ‘jati’. Kakar believes that the ‘individual anxiety’ is a reflection of the “latent concerns of a man’s immediate society, knowledge of his jati, its aspirations and apprehensions” (Kakar 147), which also contributes to the understanding of the identity ‘formation’ or ‘conflict’. Therefore, when the above mentioned autobiographies are seen through this ideology, one can understand the absence of the individual ‘self’ from them. It is because the anxiety of the self is the same as that of the community and vice-versa. Similarly, the child who grows up in the community understands its working, various relationships and their dynamics also unconsciously imbibes those values. Thus, the struggle of the author does not belong to him/ her alone. It is the struggle of an entire community.

Lastly, what is common in most Dalit autobiographies is the presence of B.R. Ambedkar and his writing. Almost all Dalit writers, be it man or woman, refer to Ambedkar’s writing in their works. The reason for this is given by Sharankumar Limbale when he discusses the role of ‘Dalit Aesthetics’ in his book. Limbale suggests as to what works of Dalit writers can be considered beautiful. He points out that Dalit writers are and have been inspired by ‘Ambedkarite thought’. However, what is important is the manner in which the author’s ideology is mixed with best expression of the Ambedkarite thought. Limbale suggests, “That work of Dalit Literature will be recognized as beautiful, and therefore ‘good’, which causes the greatest awakening of Dalit consciousness in the reader” (Limbale 117).

To conclude, Dalit literature despite being relatively new, offers an insight to the alternate history. It is the history of those who have been silenced, oppressed and excluded since thousands of years. Although, the genre of autobiography aims to celebrate one's life, the Dalit autobiography narrates the story of the millions who have suffered and in many parts of the country are still going through oppression. Their consciousness of being the 'other' is etched in to their minds since their birth. Childhood comprises the formative years of every individual. One learns the most during these years about one's class, caste, religion, family and customs which shape the individual identity. In this sense painful childhood experiences shape the ideology of Dalit consciousness. The segregation, the separation, the denial, the physical and mental oppression leads to the psychological colonization. While authors like Vasant Moon and Sheoraj Singh Bechain do not display any anger in their narration, OmprakashValmiki does not spare any crude details of his childhood. As seen above the caste laws are invisible forces projected and propagated by the hegemonic Hindu institutions which are invasive and tend to define and govern an entire community's lifestyle. However, the wind of social change is witnessed when a few dedicated and fearless individuals fought against these oppressive forces and live to tell their tales. The genre of autobiography becomes redefined when it comes in contact with the Dalit consciousness. It is seen that most of the Dalit autobiographies are not given proper attention. The reason for this could be that they challenge the power of the old Hindu traditions and the institutions which embody them. Hence, a conscious effort could have been made to silence them. Margaret Atwood in her poem "Spelling" says, "A word after a word after a word is power" (25). Similarly, the authors by voicing their stories have retaliated against the oppressive forces which had kept them silent for centuries. Raj Kumar suggests: "on the face of several oppressive social forces, these writers, with their growing perceptions and mature

imagination, capture the tensions which grow out of a continuous battle between ‘loss of identity’ and ‘asserting of self’. Thus, the very process of writing autobiography by the Dalits is a form of resistance against various forms of oppression” (Kumar 150).

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