

Looking Inward: Translated Dalit Women's Narratives

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Writing autobiographies has always been the prerogative of the intellectuals, the powerful, the rich or in other words the dominant class. Some of them like Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth* have been a part of the University Syllabus. Since they are written by learned men (men, because hardly any woman, ever of the dominant class have published their autobiographies), they are structured, well knit and in a standard tongue often philosophizing and Sapiential. It is essentially subjective, therefore a promotion of selfhood.

However, it is only in the end of the 1970's there emerged a notion of female self-hood which could be triumphantly liberated from its neglect or repression under patriarchy and made visible through writing. Also, for centuries, as Nancy Miller (1986) suggests 'Crisis of the subject', seemed to obey a peculiarly masculine political imperative and deprived women of their relation to subject hood because "women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production that men have had, they have not...(collectively) felt burdened by too much self, ego, cogito, etc." (qtd :Rooney, 120).

In 1994, Diane Elam put in a very controversial argument, siding post structuralism, saying that autobiography is an "impossible" genre since "experience" can never be

directly represented and all autobiographies produce fictions or figures in the place of self knowledge they seek. Thinking thus, not only challenges male selfhood but also women's autobiography which has then to be read as a "Strategic necessity at a particular time, rather than an end in itself."

Autobiography, in case of women subjects has provided not just a useful testing ground for feminist theories, but also productive space for different notions of female subject to emerge, one which can register the plurality of subjects — and perhaps just as crucially – the plurality of reasons for the use of the self as a form of writing. However the case of Dalit auto biographies (or to be more specific) Dalit testimonies by women are different. Since the entire dalit community and their writing is ridden with controversies because it consciously aims at being iconoclastic from mainstream autobiographies, the normal parameters of understanding female autobiographies cannot be applied to Dalit Women's' testimonies.

First of all, rather than searching for plurality of reasons and plurality of 'notions of female subject', Dalit women's' testimonies display an older or a more traditional kind of narrative where (as Rita Felski has pointed out) one is able to discern a form of confession "offering to its readership an intimate and frequently painful experience which was also seen as a part of a progressive revelation to the self and others of women's fate under patriarchy and that need for change" (qtd Anderson; 121)

Basically then Dalit women's' testimonies are consciousness raising writings which would enable readers realize the joys, nostalgia, suffering, pains of Dalit women as a collective and communal identity as women. They could also make readers realize a sense of pride and satisfaction derived by many of them in being able to realize their artistic persona and being able to contribute to the collective oeuvre of Dalit literature.

However, it is to be understood that Dalit women's' testimonies by Shantabai Kamble, Baby Kamble, Kumud Pawade, Urmila Pawar or Bama, in no way project the sense of a unique self at the cost of the community. In her autobiography *Taking it like a Woman* Anne Oakley is very articulate about what drives her own particular act of authorship. This might as well be applied for the Dalit women authors:

"This book is about my life, but it is also about others – for it would be arrogant to suppose I'm unique; I'm not...The book has taken far longer to write than any other book, I have written (for Dalit women, perhaps the only book written or events

narrated), because, I think, the chief obstacle to describing oneself as an individual located in a particular manner in a particular culture is the need not to be honest with oneself, to conceal, the person one is from oneself and, indeed, from everybody else. But I have persevered in this task precisely because I know I am living and writing about something which is recognizable to others. (qtd: Anderson, 122)

Although in a way the above confession reveals the author/narrator's dependence on the social or patriarchal structures, it wants to ironically overthrow, the confession gives definite indications to the purpose of the testimonies and marks the difference from Dalit male autobiographies. For Dalit men, autobiographies, (Atmakatha) or self-reporting (Atmavritta), were necessarily weapons of protest – often on behalf of the community, but instances of projection of the self – the ego – surfaces in spite of sincere efforts. Let us consider the conclusion from Hazari's *Untouchable: The Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste*;

The sea was rough, the boat was small, and I had never sailed before. Already I felt that I was part of a new world, encircled by the mighty ocean, which knew no creed or caste, and as I gazed toward the wide horizon, I prayed that one day I might find the peace of soul I had never known but always sought (qtd, Kumar:160)

This is Hazare who leaves the land, the people and finds better fortunes for his self and concludes (using poetic images), with his abstract wish for peace in a foreign land.

In contrast, this is what Bama writes in the forward of *Karakku*.

After seven years of living in the convent, on 8 November 1992, I left behind my life of renunciation and came out into the world. After that, I wrote my book, Karakku. That book was written as a means of healing my inward wounds; I had no other motive.(IX, Ten Years Later)

Bama, refuses to be an escapist, doesn't borrow abstractions and has a very practical, humble objective- not peace but therapy. If it had given strength, and encouragement to the Dalits, in Bama's words, those were "unexpected results".

Before, we should proceed with further discussion about Dalit womens' writings,

it would be pertinent to reinforce the scope of the word Dalit as attempted by Sharan Kumar Limbale.

“Harijans and neo-Buddhists are not the only Dalits. The term describes all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, as well as Adivasis, landless farm-labourers, the suffering masses, and nomadic and criminal tribes. In explaining the word, it will not do to refer only to the untouchable castes. People who are lagging behind economically will also need to be included.” (11)

Although a very broad based description of the Dalit, but roughly idealistic one as suggested by translator Alok Mukherjee who reverts to Limbale’s assertion elsewhere that the uniqueness of Dalit experience “rests in the fact that the core of Dalit materiality is untouchability., which results in the naming of the Dalit as the unclean, impure “Other”. It is the experience of this unique Dalitness that (as Mukherjee continues) that Dalit literature has been challenged to represent authentically. This has in turn produced a literature that is at one level mimetic. A great deal of Dalit writing is life-writing and these narratives seek to capture the authentic Dalit experience through minute chronicling Dalit experience through minute chronicling of the smallest detail of daily life in a language that, as Limbale terms it, is crude, impure and uncivil.

Dalit women’s autobiographies, be therefore, better termed rather as testimonies because, they are confessions of the ‘doubly jeopardized’. The testimonials/testimonies as understood by Doris Summer in relation to Latin American women’s writing refers to the writings ‘in the first person’ but have a “plural subject”—“the singular does not become plural by replacing or subsuming the group, but because the singular is a part of the whole, an extension of the collective.” (Anderson, 128). Menon and Bhasin comment on the importance of these testimonies:

Hardly ever, and hardly anywhere, have women “written history”. They have left few accounts, personal or otherwise, and have committed much less to writing than men. Women historians have noted this absence and emphasized the importance of retrieving womens’ histories through oral sources. Because women have used speech much more widely than the written word, oral history practitioners have found in interviews and testimonies a rich vein to mine and to surface what so far, has been hidden from history.” (14)

Dalit women’s testimonies therefore, apart from showing the usual characteristics of Dalit writing, display additional trends which in turn have become a paradigm because

this kind of writing is a part of collective consciousness. Shantabai Kamble, Baby Kamble, Kumud Pawade, Urmila Pawar or Bama write in a manner which share characteristics with their male counter parts, like:

- Being unconcerned about literary theories
 - Rejecting the established Hindu tradition
 - Portrayal of rural life settled along caste-lines.
 - Narrating the pain of the Dalits and the stigma of untouchability in general
 - Writing in an uncouth and impolite language
 - Demonstrating respect for Buddhist values, Ambedkarite movement,
- and
- Revolt, against unequal order.

But in addition to these or often in substitution of these Dalit women authors show an extraordinary tenderness, affection, love, empathy and joy which stems from the fact that they have suffered more and have been denied more than their husbands, sons or brothers. It is perhaps the testimonies of Dalit women, which have recognized the purpose of Dalit literature in the true sense of the term. Again borrowing Limbale's words. "Recognizing the centrality of the human being, this literature is thoroughly saturated with humanity's joys and sorrows (as opposed to anger in men's writing). It regards human beings as supreme, and leads them towards total revolution" (30). In case of the women, the revolution comes most often, not in the literal sense of the term, but with changing ones entire attitude and perspective of life, self and the purpose of the self in the community and larger world.

This unique introspective and detailed confessional technique, gives rise to certain shared characteristics:

- i) Joy derived from the simple things of life.
- ii) Childhood nostalgia.
- iii) Appreciation of the unique dalit way of life and exhibition of dignity.
- iv) Oral tradition, made up of work chants, folk-songs, sung at rites of passage or legends.
- v) Detailed description of the caste structure of the village.

- vi) Minute descriptions of women and children, often verging on pathos.
- vii) Humour often arising out of self criticism.
- viii) Rambling narrative typical of elderly Indian women.
- ix) Epiphanic realization of untouchability.
- x) Realization of the need to break barriers with the aid of literacy/ education, progress and conversion.
- xi) Often interiorization of pain and an ability to find peace and happiness in other sources.

Excerpts and discussions of from the various testimonies are collected to prove the above:

Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha (1988) Shantabai Kamble – “One of Shantabai’s fondest memories are of her mother sitting outside their home on starlit nights with the children and talking of years gone by.” (Observation and translation by Sharmila Rege,211)

Or, Shantabai’s happy memories about her father (Appa) who encouraged her to study and considered her a good omen, “She’s a good girl. Two sons came after her. She is a fortunate girl! He hugged me. Stroking my back he said, ‘Study hard now in the seventh’” (Dangle: 107,translator Shanta Gokhale). Similar fond memories can be detected in the other authors too:

“Every day, I bathed myself clean with Pears soap. My mother rubbed Kaminia oil on my hair, and plaited it neatly. My clothes were well washed and sparkling clean. The girls of my own caste liked to play with me because it enabled them to smell some fragrance. For my father himself was fond of toiletries” (114, Dangle. Translator Priya Adarkar, Antasphot)

“It would take me from half an hour to an hour to dawdle along, watching all the fun and games that were going on, all the entertaining novel and oddities in the streets, the shops, and the bazaar. The performing monkey, the snake which the snake charmer kept in its box... the cyclist... the merry-go-rounds and giant wheels;” (13, Karruku, Bama, translator Lakshmi Holmstrom).

Such excerpts show ones delight in one’s life, immediate environment, one’s childhood. It is important to note that the Dalit women are completely at ease with the

life they are born into and there is no urgency to change the way of life, or the rituals and practices which bestow them the uniqueness of being a Dalit and more so a woman. Yes, there are narrations of episodes like the men:- of suffering, hunger and deprivation, but these can never take away the zest for life and appreciation of one's own community: and that too in a typically feminine way. They do, what Baburao Bagul has explained: "now dalit literature is not defined by anguish, waiting and sorrow alone but is a historical necessity in promoting human freedom." (qtd. Rege, 15) or as O.K. Bedekar, a leading Marxist scholar, had also mapped the direction of Dalit literature as "moving from the articulation of the experience of humiliation to humanism and from agitation to transformation." (qtd. Rege, 15)

One important characteristic of their writing would be the minute details employed, the homely similes and metaphors to build up images of poverty and deprivation. But they are never written for the sake of it. Hardship and denial also meant that they were stronger than the other Indians (upper caste Hindus) and could actually scoff at the luxuries of life and even have a 'raja' out of the rags:

"People would be covered in thick layers of dust and dirt, a black coating on their skin. You could see deep marks where moisture trickled down. Hair, untouched by oil, fell over their shoulders in thick tangles. They looked like rag dolls, nibbled and torn by sharp toothed mice. The thick tangles of hair would be infested with lice and coated with lice eggs... Each hut contained at least eight to ten such kids, even some had fifteen to twenty. The custom was to offer the eldest son of the mother goddess. This was important. He would be called potraja. (Baby Kamble, translated Maya Pandit-Jeena Amucha, 8)"

"Some women went to beg at really far off houses hoping they would get different varieties of food. They even carried separate pots and pans to gather them. But the Kulwadi women, who gave them food, would pour the kheer or cooked vegetables and curry, whatever they had, on top of some rice and throw it into their pots... They would pour it all into a bamboo basket. Then they'd go to the river, hold the basket in the water rinsing the rice in such a way that the curry etc would drain out and only rice remained. Then they brought the washed rice home... Their families would eat this for two days. (Urmila Pawar, translator Maya Pandit, Aidan, 371)

For women Dalit authors, such experiences meant again not only an exposure of

abject distress but also an exposure of women as preservers, sources of energy and strength to the community; a fact largely overlooked by male narrators. Patience and tolerance become strengths even in the public domain, until the Ambedkarite wave touches the women too. Kumud Pawade remembers an incident when a group of Dalit women decide to join to morcha in the capital in *Antasphot*:

“Finally some seven-eight of us go and stand in the queue. From 2 to 4, in the burning scorching heat of Nagpur, we stand in the queue patiently awaiting our turn... Then we are at the top of the queue but no one bothers about us. Men from behind us shout and get the tickets. Finally we protest....” (Rege, 313)

Apart from Pawade’s narrative which shows an organized, intellectual furor with a purpose, most testimonies are rambling observations about rural or semi-rural life steeped in Gods/Goddesses legends, rituals, mores and customs which on one hand expose the Dalit woman’s abysmal backwardness on the other, they are also the havens of consolation, refuge. They become ‘utopia’ of dreams for those who realize, once the acts are over, they would become the same women of Mahar families who needed to go to the Brahmans, Marathas and Kulwadis to beg for festival food.

Shantabai recalls that several people in the community would perform rituals for their children’s survival:

“The Potraj whispered a mantra in the ears of these women and then they became possessed. They began to dance sigh loudly and crawl.” (Rege, 214)

Baby Kamble recalls the same practice and observes that “these possessed women were called goddesses or mothers... (they) danced to the beats (of Potraja) in frenzy till they collapsed in a heap on the floor, ultimately posing as holy mothers” (*The Prisons We Broke*, 22-23)

Again Bama recalls, people telling: “From that day, people said that as night time drew near, Muniyaandi (God) would walk along the rubbish tip at our street, burning torch in hand, furious... Many people had caught sight of him as he did this” to get back the offering stolen from his temple by a certain Bondan. (Karruku, 5)

Narratives of such episodes of fantasy and wish fulfillment is a common feature in the writings of Dalit Indian Women.

Parikh and Garg comment: “The other (alternative) choice adopted by Indian

Women is to cultivate an almost pure virtuousness and to adopt a life of duty tempered with faith and observation of religious rituals. They become highly normative in relation to themselves as well as others. This from of psychological location frees them to create their own boundaries and thus ward off many exploitative encounters. It also creates some space for women and gives them role and significance of being carries of the cultural heritage and family traditions....many of them acquire an added sense of meaningfulness by becoming a source of family prosperity and happiness.” (Indian Women: An Inner Dialogue,71)

In Baby Kamble's words: “These rituals, were in a sense an outlet for their oppressed souls. This is how they tried to find some solace in the terrible lives It was (initially) to the Hindu Gods that they prayed for deliverance from their suffering. They consoled themselves with the hope that their time too would come one day.” (18, The Prisons we Broke)

All these testimonios would share the details of the location of the Dalit quarters, the caste structure and the difficult relationship of the upper castes with the Dalits:

“In Konkan, the mahars lived in the centre of the village, not outside its boundaries as was customary in other parts of Maharashtra....Surrounded by the upper castes, aware of the attacks that could come from all sides if there was a minor transgression, the members of the community shrank into themselves as they walked around the village” (Aaidan,346)

Or,

“Then immediately adjacent that is where we live, the Paraya settlement. To the east of the village lies the cemetery. We live just next to that”..... “I don't know how it came about that the upper caste communities and lower caste communities were separated....But they kept themselves to their part....and we stayed in ours.”(Karukku, Bama, 7)

Whatever be the minor differences in the structure and location of caste based villages, they adhered to the basic idea stated by Limbale: “Here, the village becomes the metropolis and the Dalits exist literally on the periphery.....This physical segregation signifies other separations Dalits do the work, live the life, eat the food and wear the garment that the upper caste Hindu will not” (2). Dalits are the upper caste Hindus ‘other’ and this subaltern status is realized by the Dalit women, like their men in almost an epiphanic manner. Lack of education, centuries of physical and

mental yoke, complacency and acceptance of social systems and structures allow realization of untouchability only after a length of time.

Kumud Pawade remembers in 1978, when her brother got married in a local marriage hall, “the cooks and workers began to whisper to each other when they saw photographs of Babasaheb and Gautam Buddha being set on the stage. The cleaners refused to clean the dishes after the meal and the hall manager too pretended helplessness saying he could not really force the workers to do anything against their will.” (qtd: Rege,324)

Bama’s realization was more epiphanic. What seemed to be humorous became a grim tale of untouchability. She recalls a man carrying a food packet by the string without touching it. “The elder went straight upto the Naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand. Naicker opened the parcel and began to eat the vadais. Annan told me the man wasn’t being funny when he carried the package like that. He said everybody believed the Naickers were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas. If they did, they would be polluted. That’s why he had to carry the package by its string.” (Karruku:15)

Typical Dalit women narratives could be wry, sarcastic and language could verge on obscenity, typical to a community with little or no literacy: “Tell me, did that woman in red sari.... Finally buy your bunch of firewood or not?”

“Ha, as if she wanted to, the whore!” She would explode into fiery expletives, spitting the fiery red paan into the dust.” (Urmila Pawar, 363). This was all the more not unusual because women would be subjected to intense hard work at home and often outside to sustain the family. With no care at all, they would have like Parvati and Vitha “a face wrinkled beyond her years... mouth ... red from chewing betel ...hair dry and disheveled from carrying heavy loads... (They were) bony but strong and carried more loads of grass stacks than any man could” (Pawar, 367)

Similarly, all their writings show a need to educate themselves to combat persecution and discrimination within their own community and from the upper caste: As Shantabai Kamble recalls that although there were initial disappointments at her being appointed education officer, her colleagues and others were happy at their appointment as an officer and although the usual problem of about drinking water

surfaced, soon the Muslim and Vani neighbours “began to mix so freely with us, that they stopped observing untouchability” (132, *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha*, translated by Maya Pandit)

Without generalizing, while on one hand Dalit women's writing remains a feminist critique of patriarchy' (Pandit, XV) the narration seems to reflect their love for their people without seeming to glorify their tradition. “Outrage against the inhuman conditions of existence and love for (their) suffering people are organically fused to evolve self-critical and yet humane and mature tone. Nowhere does the narration sink into self-pity. On the contrary the narration is fused with a subtle sense of humour as evinced in descriptions of rituals baths, unwashed children. The games and weddings” (Pandit, XIV). Amdebkar, Buddha or conversion to Christianity do feature in their writings, but these women use their teachings to learn and know themselves and the world, to take pride in their 'Dalit' identity and recreate and relive themselves and the community in their testimonials. Thus their art/narrative becomes what Theodor Arno calls “an unconscious form of historiography, the memory of what has been vanquished or repressed; perhaps an anticipation of what is possible.” (qtd: Ganguly, 202) Debjani Ganguly comments, “Seen through the historicist lens, caste, as we have seen, appears as the most important signifier of India's not-yet-arrived at modernity” (203), but an aesthetic reading [as Terry Eagleton puts it, is something that ‘does not oust systematic thought, but something that furnishes it with a model of sensuous receptivity to the specific’ (361)]

The testimonies of Dalit women establishes the possibility of an alternative narrative divorced of the need to establish nation and nationalism and identity informed with considerations of caste politics. From the times of Kant, aesthetic has marked the limits of cognition and opened up vistas of knowledge not amenable to rational thought alone. Testimonies of Dalit women offer ultimately the whole domain of the subjective which includes among other things feelings of pleasure, pain or wonder at the beauty of the world around us. Feelings and sensations that are an end in themselves and that do not require a foundation in anything external to them in order to be considered valid as Kumudtai (Kumud Pawade) concludes:

“I slipped on the slope of slushy sentiment in spite of myself and the feeling scares me. I saw my control slipping. I, a detached individual, have become a prisoner

of our tangled sentiments. It is like a pain caused by the knotted tangled hair that can't be combed clean. I become an outsider to the outsider" (of Albert Camus) (Antasphot, Pawade, trans, Pandit, qtd: Rege, 342)

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