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Major Trends in Dalit Women's Autobiographies in India

The hitherto marginalized peripheral Dalits in India have come up with their own voice to help them assume a central position in literature, and their voice is a voice of protest against their crass marginalization in a caste-ridden society. The most recent offshoot of Dalit literature is the autobiographies of Dalit women who have been subject to a double-edged oppression and exclusion by both the non-Dalit upper-caste people and the Dalit patriarchy. While these autobiographies are unique on more scores than one, they remain as a faithful antenna reflecting the dystopian asphyxiating suffering of Dalit women, and a historical document of it. This essay will try to situate these Dalit autobiographies in the socio-political context of the Indian Dalits, and attempt to identify some of the major trends in them. Finally, by drawing some seminal insights from subaltern studies, this essay will try to substantiate how the Dalit women's individual voices articulated in these autobiographies repudiate Spivak's controversial claim that the subalterns cannot speak.

Keywords: postcolonial, caste, Dalits, autobiographies, subaltern

In many parts of the world, postcolonialism witnessed the articulation of a distinct voice by the hitherto suppressed and oppressed people. A country as rife with a plurality of cultures, languages, and social stratification as India is no exception to that. As far as society is concerned, the hitherto socially marginalized groups began to come up with their distinct individual voices since the beginning of the twentieth century. Broadly speaking, in the Indian context, such an oppressed group is called "Dalit". Despite being marginalized for decades, the Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular remained silent until recent times. For the first time in the history of the Dalits, attempts are being made by some Dalit women to tell their tales through some autobiographical sketches. These autobiographies testify to the fact that the subalterns can indeed speak. While these autobiographies remain as glaring social documents of social discrimination and oppression, they also emerge as a sub-genre in the literary history of the Dalits. Rather than point out the differences between a traditional autobiography and a Dalit woman's autobiography, and rather than enter into any exegeses on autobiography and its theoretical underpinnings, this paper will try to situate these Dalit autobiographies in the socio-political context of the Indian Dalits, briefly dwell on a few Dalit autobiographies (also known as "testimonies") written by Dalit women, try to identify some of the major trends in Dalit women's autobiographies, and finally, offer a critique of them. Since the advent of

subaltern studies in the 1980s in India, fresh perspectives of reassessing the marginal class and their literature began to emerge. While situating these autobiographies within the broad perspective of their sociological context, my further attempt in this paper will be to re-examine some of the representative Dalit women's autobiographies through the lens of subaltern studies.

Theoretical Framework

Broadly speaking, postcolonialism is directed against the Eurocentric propensity to project the West as history. The Subaltern Studies in India – formed roughly around the 1970s during the Indira Gandhi government – were one of the manifestations of postcolonial consciousness in India. The term "subaltern" may be traced to the Marxist critic Antonio Gramsci who, in his "History of the Subaltern Classes: Methodological Criteria", a section of his book *Notes on Italian History*,[1] later published as *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, used it for the first time. In Gramsci's parlance the term "subaltern" meant something or somebody belonging to inferior rank, and referred to the peasants and the working classes. Gramsci expressed his skepticism about the unity of the subaltern class, and argued that they "are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a 'State'" (1971: 52). Gramsci's concern about the subaltern's "active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations" (1971: 52) bespeaks his engaging interest in hegemony. Gramsci observes that subaltern classes "are always subject to the activity of ruling groups even when they rebel and rise up; only 'permanent' victory breaks their subordination, and that not immediately" (1971: 55).

The first impetus for Subaltern Studies in India was perceived in the great initiative of Ranajit Guha.[2] Rather than ignore and preclude the dominant elitist groups, the purpose of Subaltern Studies was, as Guha points out, to "rectify the elitist bias" prevailing in South-Asian Studies (1982*:* vii). Contending that the subaltern had an independent distinct history, never subservient to the dominant elite, Guha identified within the colonized subaltern subject "the politics of the people", which itself constituted an autonomous domain independent of both the elite politics and colonialism (1982: 3–4). He scoffs at the erroneous notion that Indian nationalism was an achievement of the elites (1982: 1). Criticizing the elitist historiography as "one-sided and blinkered historiography" (1982: 3), and "un-historic historiography" incapable of capturing "the *politics of the people*" (1982: 4), Guha stresses the significance of a distinct subaltern historiography.

Later Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"[3] goes against Guha's views, and persuasively contends that the subaltern cannot articulate his/her voice for himself/herself, inasmuch as the very colonial matrix intrinsically rules out such an attempt. Spivak draws overtly from some of the concepts of Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze, and proceeds to explore the limitations of the subaltern classes in a social fabric dominated by the elites. Referring to Deleuze's contention that "Reality is what actually happens in a factory, in a school, in barracks, in a prison, in a police station",[4] Spivak warns that "[t]his foreclosing of the necessity of the difficult task of counterhegemonic ideological production has not been salutary" (Morris 2010: 309). In a tone of anticipation Spivak argues: "Neither Deleuze nor Foucault seems aware that the intellectual within socialized capital, brandishing concrete experience, can help consolidate the international division of labor" (Morris 2010: 309). She further argues that the very attempt of subsuming the subaltern within the purview of postcolonial studies, and particularly within Western academia, has been counterproductive, for it has relegated the subaltern to a state of permanent marginality.

Apart from her skeptical views about the counterhegemonic subaltern voice, Spivak also stressed the heterogeneous aspect of subalternity, and categorically asserts that "the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous" (Morris 2010: 324). And it is this heterogeneity that also accounts for the complexity, plurality, contradiction and difference, integral to the subaltern consciousness. As Spivak puts it: "For the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation" (Morris 2010: 327). And yet, she is skeptical of such a representation, and therefore asks: "How can we touch the consciousness of the people, even as we investigate their politics? With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?" (Morris 2010: 327). Apprehending that "the assumption and construction of a (subaltern woman's) consciousness or subject" may "in the long run, cohere with the work of imperialistic subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization", Spivak anticipates that "the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever" (Morris 2010: 342–343). Unlike Guha who assigns an autonomous domain to the colonized subaltern discourse,[5] Spivak refuses to accept such a "full autonomy" of the subaltern subject, for, as she argues, "historiographic exigencies will not allow such endorsements to privilege subaltern consciousness" (Morris 2010: 325). Spivak's essay ultimately boils down to her bold and rather controversial comment – "The subaltern cannot speak" (Morris 2010: 365).

But the purpose of this essay is to examine how, despite Spivak's anticipation and apprehension, the Dalit women in India – offshoots of Subaltern Studies – are highly capable of registering their autonomous and authentic voice. What is so typical of Spivak is her propensity for assigning absolute power to the elite hegemonic group, and this very assumption has possibly led her to treat the subaltern from a diffident and skeptical angle. As Benita Parry has so wonderfully put it:

> Since the native woman is constructed within multiple social relationships and positioned as the product of different class, caste, and cultural specificities, it should be possible to locate traces and testimony of women's voice on those sites where women inscribed themselves as healers, ascetics, singers of sacred songs, artisans and artists, and by this to modify Spivak's model of the silent subaltern. (Parry 1987: 35)

Parry's prescription may also be applicable to those Dalit women who were at once the victims of social oppression, and who turn out to be "healers" of their society. The purpose of this research is "to locate traces and testimony of women's voice", to borrow Parry's words, among a few Dalit women who told their own tales in a searing naturalistic account, and by so doing, belied Spivak's anticipation that the subaltern cannot speak.

Historical Perspective

Etymologically speaking, the word "Dalit"[6] is derived from the Sanskrit root "dala" (meaning "to oppress"), and thus the word literally means "downtrodden" or "trampled" or "trodden". The word "Dalit" borders on the sense of a marginal group being exploited by a dominant group. Broadly speaking, the Dalits are an offshoot of what is popularly known as the "subalterns" but are essentially rooted in a marginalized tribal caste-based Indian context. Thus, to understand the genesis of Dalits, we need to have a fair idea of the caste system which has existed in India for centuries together. India had a four-tier social structure known as "chaturvarna", comprising four main castes: the Brahmans, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Shudras. The Brahmans were considered superior to the other castes, and they were mainly assigned the role of worshipping and learning. Many Brahmans were known for their erudition and their knowledge of Hindu scriptures. The Kshatriyas were usually the kings, rulers, and strong warriors who ruled and protected the society from enemies. The Vaishyas were usually the people associated with trade and business, and financial matters, while the Shudras, the

lowest in this hierarchy, were supposed to be born to serve the remaining three classes. This caste-based society was premised upon the functions they were assigned to perform, and it was believed that, for a smooth functioning of the society, this function-based caste system – or what is known as "Varnashramadharma" (caste-based occupation) – should be maintained. Manu, an ancient Indian sage in his *Manusmriti* (Laws of Manu) strongly recommends the maintenance of this four-tier social structure, and by doing so, has advocated and promoted a social structure of Brahmanical domination. It is the same Manu who virtually denied any freedom to a woman:

> Her father protects (her) in her childhood,
> her husband protects (her) in youth,
> and her sons protect (her) in old age,
> and a woman is not fit for independence. (Buhler 1886: 139)[7]

While this rigid patriarchal social structure, along with its four-tier caste system, had existed for centuries, along with the advent of British Raj in India, this caste-system became more intricate and complex with the concept of Aryan-supremacy being added to the old social structure. A fifth category, known as the Atishudras, comprising people below the Shudras, was added. The entire Indian social structure was thus actuated with a fissiparous conflicting prejudice of the dominant Brahmans against the Shudras and the Atishudras. Suffice it to say, this hegemonic Brahman-dominated society became a crucible of social oppression and exploitation of the lower castes. And, if exploitation exists for a prolonged time, dissent and protest cannot be far behind. Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890), a subaltern Maharashtrian social reformer, in his tract on slavery written originally in Marathi as "Gulamgiri" (meaning "Slavery"), crusaded against the Brahminical hegemony and also against the Aryan-supremacy myth, and sought to put an end to both, by demanding a reorientation of this social structure. He took strong exception to the fact that the Shudras and Atishudras, the original inhabitants of this land, were being dispossessed of their privileges by the white European conquerors. He founded "Satyasodhak Samaj" (literally meaning "Society for Truth Seekers") with a view to alleviating the miseries of downtrodden lower-caste people by laying bare their searing suffering and their dystopian plight. He intuited that education alone can invest women with empowerment, and hence laid emphasis on women education. It was B.R. Ambedkar who emerged almost like a messiah to clamor for the rights and privileges of the socially marginalized people of India. He was critical of both Gandhi and the Indian National Congress

(INC) for their similar indifference to the sufferings of the marginalized classes. Unlike the earlier Congress leaders like W. C. Bonnerjea, Dadabhai Naoroji, Badruddin Tyabji, among others, it was Annie Besant who, as the President of INC, for the first time officially resolved in the Calcutta session in 1917 to eradicate the oppression of the marginalized classes.

There was an upsurge of Dalit writings in India after the advent of Dalit Panthers, a social organization founded by Namdeo Dhasal and J. V. Pawar on 29 May 1972 in Maharastra, crusading against caste discrimination. The Dalits also founded a journal "Asmitadarsh" edited and founded by Gangadhar Pantawane. In the mid-1980s the Dalit feminists founded their wing called "Mahila Samsad" in Mumbai. By the mid-1990s, the "Samvadini – Dalit Stree Sahitya Maanch" was founded. This was followed by the founding of the "National Federation of Dalit Women", and "All India Dalit Women's Forum". In December 1996 Dr Pramila Leela Sampat organized a "Vikas Vanchit Dalit Mahila Parishad" (literally meaning "a forum for Dalit women deprived of development"). The Dalits assumed a transnational status at the end of the twentieth century and in the wake of the twenty-first century. The identity of the Dalits was no longer confined within India. The first Dalit international conference was held in October 1998 in Malaysia. Another international conference on Dalit human rights was organized by the Voice of Dalit International (VODI) in September 2000. In the "World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance" held in Durban in 2001, the Dalits demanded that the UN should include caste as a form of racism, and tried to project themselves as victims of racial discrimination. In May 2003 another international conference of the Dalits – "Dalit Vision for the 21st Century" – was held in Vancouver. The Dalits adopted eleven-point demands known as the "Vancouver Declaration" which sought both the recognition of Dalits and more privileges for them in national and international territories in terms of education, research and employment.

Gradually, Dalit writers began to assert themselves and tell their tales. Ironically and sadly, despite the elapse of more than seven decades of Indian Independence, no government has ever itemized the amelioration of the sufferings of Dalit women in their 5-year plans or national planning policies. However, there have been sporadic government efforts to dish out some doles and donations to the Dalits in general, but the government's inability to feel and fathom the intensity of accursed Dalit women still persists. Even the women movements which have churned out in India since the 1970s did not accommodate the asphyxiating sordidness of Dalit women in their agenda. While at the initial phases the women movements were geared towards women's rights, women's liberation and autonomy, the later phases of their movements stressed, among other things, women empowerment, women employment,

women's participation in democracy and politics, domestic violence, violence at workplace, etc. Thus, Dalit women have remained, as it were, as "invisible women" in the socio-political flux of India. They have been doubly excluded by the governments and also by the so-called feminists of India, relegating them to a non-existent entity. As Raj Kumar rightly points out: "The issues related to Dalit women have hardly been taken up seriously either by political leaders or scholars until very recently" (2010: 211).

Dalit women were subject to a double-edged oppression: the oppression coming from the external society in general, and the patriarchal oppression operating within the very Dalit society. A few Dalit male writers like Namdeo Dhasal, the Telegu lyricist Gummadi Vittal Rao (popularly known by his pseudonym Gaddar), Arun Krushnaji Kamble, Dagdu Maruti Pawar, Jatin Bala, Om Prakash Valmiki, Baburao Bagul, Manoranjan Byapari, among others, even while crusading against the atrocity and discrimination against the Dalit community in general, failed to address the typical problems of Dalit women in particular. Thus, Dalit women were, as it turns out, doubly excluded: by upper-class non-Dalit writers who scarcely wrote about them, and also by their male Dalit counterparts who overlooked their suffering. As Moumita Sarkar so succinctly puts it: "There has been a deliberate erasure of Dalit women's issues from Dalit men's writings [...] If 'Brahmanic patriarchy' oppresses Dalit women because of their caste, then 'Dalit patriarchy' oppresses them too due to their gender" (2016: 211).

One of the significant aspects of the Dalits is the Dalit autobiographies written by Dalit women. Sharmila Rege in her book *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* enumerates eight Dalit women writers who wrote their autobiographies or what Rege prefers to call "testimonies", inasmuch as these narratives testify to their searing suffering, and by doing so, remain historical documents of a saga of hitherto unacknowledged and unrecorded exploitation and oppression.

If, on the one hand, these autobiographical narratives become a social document of injustice and inequality, they also act as a triggering force for a better future, and as D. P. Das has rightly suggested, they engender "hope for a Utopia, the expectations of emergence of a just and equitable society based on egalitarian social order" (1985: xi). Apart from these, there are also interesting Tamil Dalit women's autobiographies as Bama's *Karukku* and Viramma's *Viramma* which have arrested the attention of scholars and readers alike. This paper will discuss three representative autobiographies – Bama's *Karukku*, Mukta Sarvagod's *Mitilei Kavaade*, and Kumud Pawade's *Antasphot* – as sample texts to examine the common traits which characterize them, their specificity and distinctness notwithstanding.

Scope of the Study

While critics have shed much light[8] on exploring the conditions of women in India, very few have really taken up the issues of Dalit autobiographies seriously and comprehensively. The first attempt in this regard was that of the wonderful research by Sharmila Rege in her *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonies.* Suffice it to say, apart from serving as an invaluable primary source for any research on Dalit women's life-narratives, this book offers us vivid glimpses and moving sketches of the eight Maharastrian Dalit women whose tales are translated by Rege with the help of Maya Pandit. But even while it acts as an essential companion to Dalit literature, it neither includes nor discusses anything related to such prominent Tamil Dalit women voices like those of Bama and Viramma. Furthermore, the staple of this book comprises translated excerpts from Marathi into English, and as such, a detailed discussion of these eight life-narratives is largely missing in this book. Later, Raj Kumar in another excellent research work, *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*, offers a wonderful trajectory of Dalit life-narratives in terms of three crucial factors – caste, nation and identity – to substantiate how these factors chisel and condition the dynamics of their narratives. Kumar argues that "the very emergence of Dalit autobiography is an act of resistance because Dalits are using this opportunity to assert their identities through their writings" (2010: 259). Moumita Sarkar in her article "Redefining Dalit Women's Autobiography" analyzes some of the testimonies included in Rege's book *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, and infers that each of these testimonies "compels the readers, their community members, and the savarnas[9] to recognize the contribution of the women's movement, which is not recorded in history" (2016: 218). While Sarkar rightly points out the almost unacknowledged women's movement churned out by these autobiographies, she fails to figure out the ruling traits of these autobiographies. Preeti Dewan in her article "Dalit Women's Autobiographies: From Subjection to Subjecthood" traces the evolution of Dalit women from their erstwhile marginal position to the central position of subjecthood, with particular reference to autobiographical excerpts from Vimal Dadasaheb More and Baby Kamble. But none of these works, while indicating the invaluable role of Dalit women's autobiographies in reconstructing issues of gender, identity, history, and nationhood, maps out all the possible trends in these autobiographies. Furthermore, what has possibly eluded the notice of many of these very competent researchers and scholars is how to examine these autobiographies through the insights derived from subaltern studies, which in the twenty-first century has become as indispensable as it is unavoidable. Given this research gap, this essay

seeks to explore some representative Dalit women's autobiographies, and intends to chart out some of the emerging trends in those autobiographies, and how they provide a wonderful critique of subaltern studies.

Methodology

At the very outset, I must admit the intrinsic problem of researching on this topic: despite many autobiographies written by Dalit women available in the Marathi language, only a very small number of them have been translated fully into English. As Raj Kumar rightly points out:

> Dalit autobiographies are so far relatively few in number; many of them have not been translated into English and hence go unnoticed in the eyes of so-called mainstream literary critics. Thus, Dalit autobiography, like Dalit literature, has to go a long way – it has to be written, published, translated, read, and critiqued. (2010: 261)

This essay confronts the same challenge faced by any research work with a translated version of the original. But since the purpose of this paper is not to find out the things lost in translation from the original vernacular language – a topic suitable for further critical exploration – and since my focus is sociological rather than linguistic, I have left out the problematic of translation in this essay.

Against the historical backdrop of the origins and development of Dalits in India, this essay will therefore analyze the autobiographies of Dalit women, and try to offer a critique of them through the seminal insights derived from Subaltern Studies. Furthermore, given the objective of this essay to identify some of the major trends in the autobiographies written by Dalit women, the essay will apply an eclectic methodology – by using historical, theoretical and literary parameters – to critique these autobiographies.

Analysis

Bama's *Kurukku*

The Tamil Dalit feminist Bama's novel *Karukku* – supposed to be the first Tamil Dalit autobiography – was written in 1992 when the demolition of the Babri mosque spewed riots

between the Hindus and the Muslims throughout India. Furthermore, this was a really turbulent time because the Mandal Commission's recommendation for 27 per cent reservation for Backward Classes in Central Government jobs during the then Prime Minister Viswanath Pratap Singh, fomented political violence and students' unrest. Derived from the Tamil word *karu* meaning 'embryo', the Tamil word *karukku* refers to the double-edged palmyra leaf. In the Preface to *Karukku* Bama writes: "Not only did I pick up the scattered palmyra karukku in the days when I was sent out to gather firewood scratching and tearing my skin as I played with them, but *later they also became the embryo and symbol that grew into this book*" (2000: xiii, emphasis added). As Raj Kumar puts it so cogently: "The embryo Bama refers to is the Dalit consciousness and the symbol is the new revolution, which aims at bringing a new social order into the Indian society" (2010: 231–232). Like the metaphor of grass in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Bama's *Karukku* becomes a vital metaphor for the growth of her consciousness and the development of her society.

Bama, the oppressed Dalit protagonist of this autobiography, crusades against the multilayered forms of oppression evident in her society in terms of class, caste, and gender. Like many Dalits, her family members were also converted to Christianity. And yet, this conversion did not bring about any real improvement in the lives of the Dalits. On the contrary, religious conversion added the fourth dimension – religion – to the tripartite discrimination on the basis of class, caste and gender. In spite of her obscure social genesis, Bama inches her way to success by overcoming the arduous obstacles to her life. Passing through the vicissitudes of poverty and social exclusion, she ultimately becomes a teacher in a convent after completing her graduation from a college.

Later her choice of serving the poor and the distressed as a Catholic nun fails to precipitate any blissful change in the society. Even within the Christian Catholic community she notices conspicuous discrimination between the upper caste to which the church authorities belonged and the lower caste to which Bama and other converted Dalits and tribal people belonged. Unable to put up with the continual onslaughts of social harassment and humiliation because of being a Dalit Christian, Bama resigns from her job as a teacher, and devotes herself to altruistic activities in her society. But it was not an easy task even to work within her community. Much to her chagrin, Bama realizes that her society prioritizes caste over education, and thus, her education does not shield her from being socially deprived and even derided as a Dalit woman. Even when Bama joins as a teacher, her society refuses to acknowledge her simply because she belongs to the Dalit community. For example, Bama relates her experience of disgrace in her classroom after her humiliation by a priest: "When I

entered the classroom, the entire class turned to look at me, and I wanted to shrink into myself as I went and sat on my bench, still weeping" (2000: 17). Bama relates how "each day brings new wounds", and how she has "seen the brutal frenzied and ugly face of society" (2000: 105). And yet, instead of acquiescing in her suffering in a passive way, Bama becomes an active crusader against it and fosters the same message among her fellow-sufferers:

> We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feelings: we must dare to stand up for change. (2000: 25)

This comment attests to her self-dignity, her rationality and her power of leadership.

And yet, Bama feels that she is alienated from her community. Ironically, it is her education that becomes the cause of this alienation, for her education and her previous job – the hallmark of material comfort for many – make it difficult for Bama to get assimilated within the Dalit community marked by precariousness and struggle. Furthermore, to resign from a job that hitherto ensured a prosperous living makes her exposed to the real pangs of poverty and destitution. As Bama puts it so naturalistically:

> Today I do know what it is to be hungry, to suffer illness in solitude, to stand and stare without a paisa[10] in one's hand, to walk along the street without protection, to be embarrassed by a lack of appropriate clothes, to be orphaned and entirely alone, to swim against the tide in this life without position or status or money or authority. (2000: 102–103)

And yet, rather than regret her decision of resignation from her job, she rejoices in being an integral part of her Dalit community. It is through her vital participation in her altruistic work among her community that Bama retrieves her sense of freedom: "I can breathe once again independently and at ease, like a fish that has at last returned to the water, and having been flung outside and suffered distress" (2000: 104). Thus, while her job ensured her material comfort, it robbed her of her essential genial spirit and her characteristic freedom that she regains after her return to her Dalit community.

What makes Bama's *Karukku* so unique as an autobiography is her strategic attempt to represent her Dalit community through her personal experience. As Raj Kumar puts it: "Instead of her individual self coming to occupy the center stage, she evokes the collective self of the

entire Dalit community suggesting that the autobiographical 'I' does not have an autonomous life outside the collective 'we'" (2010: 232). There is a deliberate attempt of Bama to present herself as the mirror of her Dalit community, and to annex her Dalit community to her personal cause. Her feelings are also reflections of her entire class: "I share the same difficulties and struggles that all the Dalit poor experience. I share to some extent the poverty of the Dalits who toil far more painfully through fierce heat and beating rain…" (Bama 2000: 67–68). Significantly, Bama's crusade against this social deprivation and exploitation of the Dalits is constructive rather than subversive. Towards the end of this novel, we find that Bama enjoins her fellow beings to do away with all the invisible forms of discrimination in society, and turns out to be a sort of messiah among her Dalit community. Raj Kumar has rightly observed that "*Karukku* signifies both Dalit oppression and Dalit struggle to get out from such an oppressive state" (2010: 232).

The struggle of Bama also points to two crucial facts: the heterogeneity of the subaltern subject, as Spivak envisaged, and her double-edged oppression. When Bama joins as a teacher, she realizes the clear split within her Dalit society from which she feels mentally alienated. Thus, rather than find a uniform Dalit society where every member shares the same sensibility, Bama's narrative hints at the invisible stratification of a highly complex and heterogeneous social structure. "[T]he exclusion of the margins of even the center-periphery articulation", Spivak argues, "seems historically, disciplinarily, and practically forbidden by Right and Left alike" (Morris 2010: 342). Spivak categorically observes: "It is not just a question of *double* displacement, as it is not simply the problem of finding a psychoanalytic allegory that can accommodate the third-world woman within the first" (Morris 2010: 342). One may be tempted to add that Spivak's contention applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the case of Bama who becomes a victim of "double displacement", both within and outside her community.

Mukta Sarvagod's *Mitilei Kavaade*

Mukta Sarvagod's *Mitilei Kavaade*, translated as *Closed Door*, relates the asphyxiating dystopian tale of Mukta Sarvagod (1922–2004), as well as her eventual liberation from the prison-like existence and the achievement of self-assertion. A Dalit working indefatigably for the improvement of her Dalit community, Muktabai, as she was popularly called, chose to write her life narrative at the instance of the famous veteran leader Yadunath Thate, when she was living in anonymity at Dr. Baba Amte's ashram in Ananadvan.

Unlike her Dalit counterparts such as Baby Kamble, Kumud Pawade, Urmila Pawar, and Bama, Muktabai did not grow up in a strictly Dalit community. And yet, her very birth in a Dalit family made her exposed to varied forms of social exclusion and humiliation. When, at the age of five, she attended a school at Puntambe, she had the first inklings of social discrimination in her very school. She recollects how her class teacher would maintain a conspicuous distance from her, and did not allow her to touch the teacher's table. She gives vivid accounts of cruel corporeal punishment inflicted upon Dalit students: being pandied by heavy wooden rulers, both for punishment and for avoiding physical contact with Dalit students, was a common practice. She poignantly recalls how, like women in the Dalit community comprising the mahars, the bhils and the mangs, among others, her grandmother would sell piles of grass garnered from hilltops so as to eke out a bare survival.

Hers was arguably a case of double-edged exclusion of a Dalit woman: if the elites excluded her from having the enlightenment of education, her fellow Dalit women only accentuated the cause of such exclusion. Her narration is as much an account of her as it is a reflection of her Dalit community and its culture. She recollects how the big farmers would store their grain in the underground grain cellar, the task of which was assigned to the mahars some of whom would die while discharging this perilous job. The landlords would often deprive the mahars by giving them some rotten or hollow grain, keeping the good grain for their consumption and business. This is but a local micro-variation of the eternal saga of exploitation of the labor class by the capitalists, and a manifestation of hegemony, *mutatis mutandis.* During the months when there was no cultivation, the plight of the impoverished mahars was aggravated. Muktabai delineates their hunger and poverty with moving naturalistic descriptions. She also dishes out elaborate descriptions of her marriage and its concomitant rituals in the mahar community. Her memories of the 'devadasi' practice in which a woman is dedicated to a goddess only attest to the superstitious sensibility of her contemporary society. One must note, her narrative was not confined to the mahar community alone, for it offered a faithful portrait of her society, warts and all.

Muktabai recalls the gradual changes ushering in her society. For example, when they had access to *Bahishkrut Bharata* (literally meaning "India of the Ex-communicated"), a newspaper dedicated to the cause of B. R. Ambedkar, people would throng to her house to listen to the news being read loudly by Muktabai, who was considered to be a good reader. As Muktabai writes: "When it was a holiday, they would pester me to read because I was considered a good reader" (Trans. in Rege 2018: 183).

One of the early influences on Muktabai was that of Palit Pavan Buwa, a holy Brahmin who infused the Dalits with invigorating thoughts of freedom and ideas of resistance and rebelliousness. If this be considered a political provocation or "the politics of the people", one does not fail to notice how it stems from an unexpected corner – here from a Brahmin holy man, considered to belong to the opposite pole – and *ipso facto*, testifies to Ranajit Guha's contention that within the subaltern discourse "the politics of the people" is independent of both colonialism and the elites. Such early influences brewed up to form her Ambedkerite women's groups, known as "mahila mandals" which manifested different forms of resistance.

What Muktabai's narrative poignantly captures is that the very hallmark of being a Dalit tells not only on one's personal life at every stage of one's development, but equally percolates through the succeeding generations, and continues to plague them alike. Thus, even when her husband had a secure economic footing, her son was often derided as a "mahar" by his fellow students at school. She also recalls when her husband was transferred to Islampur, how difficult it was for her to get a house for rent, for most Hindu families would not rent a house to someone belonging to the "untouchable" Dalit people. Here, too, one finds how within one's religion, one becomes a victim of exclusion because of the prevailing dominance of caste which eclipsed even such a strong denominator like education. Unable to find any housemaid from the upper-caste people, she finally wanted to give this job to people belonging to the Dalit class. Much to her chagrin, even these Dalit women refused to work at her house simply because they preferred their job of cutting grass for fuel to doing household chores. As Rege writes: "At such times, Muktabai recalls feeling very alone – neither the larger society nor her own community was willing to accept her and her family" (2018: 186). This is indisputably another instance of her double displacement. If Partha Chatterjee argues that "subaltern consciousness was split within itself, that it was constituted by elements drawn from the experiences of both dominant and subordinate classes"[11] (Morris 2010: 113), the lukewarm and unsteady reaction of Dalit women towards Muktabai because of her better financial position among them, exemplifies such a split.

An acute and insightful observer, Muktabai could see through the apparent happenings of life, and was hence skeptical of the so-called projections of improvement by the other strata of society. She could not but see through the plight of the Dalits despite the vaunting of the nationalist leaders who parried the real problems of the Dalits under the trumpet of nationalism. Thus, rather than rejoice in the Indian Independence on August 15, 1947, she offers a cynical and vitriolic critique of the import of independence:

> What did independence mean to them (the Dalits)? They did not know. For they continued to work in the fields for their daily wages, their everyday lives filled with the same humiliations. Their wives wore the same tattered saris. Children continued to roam naked, with stale pieces of bread in their hands. Where was independence reflected in all of these? The nation had become independent but nobody had time to answer these questions. (Trans. in Rege 2018: 187)

She further laid bare the hollowness underlying such an independence which cannot ensure food for the poor, and when "mahars and mangs still had to beg for hours for drinking water" (Trans. in Rege 2018: 188). This may be interpreted in terms of Guha's attack against the elitist historiography which tended to "represent Indian nationalism as primarily an idealist venture in which the indigenous elite led the people from subjugation to freedom" (1982: 2).

Later, when Muktabai shifted to Mumbai along with her family, she was entrusted with the responsibility of the secretary of a "mahila mandal" (meaning "women's group"). But as she assumed her responsibility, she noticed, to her dismay, the invisible barriers of regional chauvinism and narrow sectarianism working within the members of this women's group. This also testifies to the ambivalence and fissiparous tendencies working within the Dalit feminist groups. Muktabai's unflagging activities among the mahila mandals gathered momentum, leading to the sprouting of more such groups working for the emancipation of Dalit women. Later, when her husband was transferred to Pune, she continued to work indefatigably for the indigent and the distressed, and founded more women's groups through her competent leadership. She also worked steadily for the rehabilitation of people living in the slums, and for the Harijans (under a scheme called Harijan Cooperative Housing Societies). With the help of the Education Department of Maharashtra, Muktabai also initiated training courses for both young girls and teachers. She also prepared a broad curriculum which accommodated courses in formal education, physical education, vocational courses and sensitization courses for marginalized women and prostitutes.

Little wonder then, in keeping with the significance of her name – "Muktabai", literally meaning "the free woman" – the life of Muktabai was a continual struggle towards opening the "closed door" of superstition, deprivation and discrimination with the keys of education, justice and social reforms. Ironically, her name is counterpoised against the title of her autobiography, for the embodiment of freedom seems to be writing a tale of imprisonment (indicated by "Closed Door"). Finally, it may be said that Muktabai did succeed in her struggle and did open the "closed doors" for the Dalits towards education, enlightenment and emancipation.

Kumud Pawade's *Antaspot*

Kumud Pawade's *Antaspot* (translated as "Thoughtful Outburst") sketches the life-struggle of a Dalit girl Kumud Somkuwar Pawade who later became a Professor of Sanskrit. Born in 1938 to a Mahar family in Maharashtra, Kumudtai grew up in the house of her maternal grandmother. An undeviating devotee of Hinduism, her grandmother would tell her tales from Hindu puranas. Kumudtai recalls how people working in the mills would often throng in their house to listen to tales from puranas from her grandmother. The tales of some great Indian women – Sita, Savitri, Damayanti, Narmada and Mandodari – exercised an indelible impact on the childhood psyche of Kumudtai. She was particularly drawn to the heroic spirit of Savitri, the embodiment of fidelity and chastity, one who overcame all her hurdles and succeeded in reclaiming the life of her deceased husband from Yama. Kumudtai assimilated the intrepidity and moral integrity of Savitri's character, and this later helped Kumudtai wrestle with the forces of social discrimination and casteism of her society. These mythical women characters of India went a long way to shape her personality, and brought out the strong woman in her.

The advent of her husband's maternal aunt, Mayabai, in their family – following an estrangement from her husband due to his second marriage – gave Kumudtai the first inkling of the sufferings of women in a rigid Hindu family. She came to know from Mayabai the excruciating effects of dowry, resulting not only in constant and consistent mental torture of brides, but also in their killing on certain occasions. She learns from Mayabai how following the unfortunate death of her second child, she was stamped as a barren woman by her in-laws, and how her husband continued with his extramarital liaison with another woman. Kumudtai was surprised to find how Mayabai was the embodiment of an all-tolerant Hindu woman who, despite so much humiliation from her estranged husband, would keep fasting for his weal. When Kumudtai tried to logically convince Mayabai of the stupidity of such fasting, she would justify it saying, "Bai, at least in the next life he will have more sense" (Trans. in Rege 2018: 307). Not only does it reflect the pan-Indian Hindu belief in afterbirth, but, more importantly, it brings out the acquiescent, tolerant, spineless nature of many women who were used to their humiliation, and by doing so, strengthened the patriarchal hold in the society. Later Kumudtai taught Mayabai to see things logically, and to shun fasting for a husband having extramarital liaisons. Mayabai was finally convinced and she gave up fasting for a wrong cause. This simple incident only attests to Kumudtai's incipient potential as a logical speaker, a quality that later became her hallmark as a public speaker and a leader. This also brings out her sense of

modernity through which she could exorcise the invisible spirits of superstition and false beliefs through her reasoning and questioning.

Rege observes that "Kumudtai's spirit of interrogation led her to examine the practices of women's organisations and their resistance to focusing on dalit women" (2018: 309). Kumudtai inveighs against the Marxist proponents and Leftist parties for having failed to recognize caste as the root of the suffering of women. In their blind ideological belief in class, she argues, they have overlooked one crucial denominator of society – caste. Having assimilated the philosophies of both Jyotirao Phule and B. R. Ambedkar, Kumudtai rightly identifies education as the means of women emancipation. Referring to the duplicitous attitude of upper-class people, she suggests that while the upper-class people may not publicly castigate the caste-system and its unhappy consequences, they are very much racked by the caste-consciousness. With a rare acuity of insight Kumudtai interrogates the paradox and duplicity of human behavior to offer a sardonic satire of it:

> The man from the huts forgets his humble abode when he enters this hall. The man from the masses rejects the masses the moment he becomes the man of the class. He entirely forgets that he owes something to the community where he was born. We sell ourselves for comfort and convenience. That is our tragedy. (Trans. in Rege 2018: 315)

It is an undeniable fact that while women of all classes can feel the sad consequences of oppression and subjugation, it is the Dalit women alone who openly give vent to and inveigh against such forms of oppression, inasmuch as they alone are the victims of such oppression, and they alone are rendered perpetually precarious and vulnerable to the apparatus of suppression. Kumudtai's life-narrative also offers us vivid flashes of the ruthless violence and mayhem perpetrated on the mahars in Nagpur during 1946, of the sinister panic that prevailed in areas like Malipura and Kostipura, and of the hiding of many Dalit leaders following the murder of the mill worker Ramdas Dongre.

A great orator and a modern thinker, Kumudtai enjoined the young Dalit girl activists who attended the convention in Delhi, to do away with their traditional methods of working, and to adopt modern methods of the upper classes instead, but she also warns them against blind imitation of the attitude of the upper class: "[I]f this tendency to imitate the attitude of the higher class takes root among us, we'll also become prisoners of class-consciousness" (Trans. in Rege 2018: 313). She also stressed the need to "fight against the three 'S's – *Savarnas* (the upper castes), the *Sadhanas* (the rich) and *Sawakars* (the money lenders)"

(Trans. in Rege 2018: 311). One does not fail to notice that Kumudtai's crusade against the higher classes subscribes to Guha's persuasive suggestion in *Subaltern Studies* to shed the elitist bias.

Possessed with a rare ratiocinative faculty, Kumudtai categorically speaks of fighting against the wrong attitude rather than against classes:

> Really, this is not a question of caste, nor of class but of attitude and approach. And if the attitude is to oppress, it has to be resisted… If we ourselves are opposing and exploiting somebody, our being dalits does not justify it. That will also have to be resisted. (Trans. in Rege 2018: 311–312)

The above comment brings out the facts that Kumudtai had a rare acuity to harp on the right string of any problem, and that she was very much objective and self-critical of her own people. She could also realize that the community, being an accumulation of individuals, "will progress only if the individual does". But the other side of the picture is equally true, and thus, "if the individual is corrupt, oppressive, violent, and has a repressive and debased attitude, the community will undoubtedly become like that also" (Trans. in Rege 2018: 312). She is aghast to find the lack of sincerity and seriousness among a huge number of members attending the Delhi convention, and particularly at the indifference of Dalit writers:

> Well, at least writers could be more sensitive! But even dalit literature is intoxicated with the celebration of the self. They are busy, each one drawing the plaster off the other's wounds. *So does anyone have the capacity to awaken the conscience? Is anyone conscientious?* (Trans. in Rege 2018: 318, emphasis added).

Since conscience is a disciplined refinement of one's consciousness, the last part of her comment, emphasized here, may remind any perceptive reader of Spivak's skepticism: "How can we touch the politics of the consciousness of the (Subaltern) people, even as we investigate their politics?" (Morris 2010: 327).

Given the meaning of the word "dalit" being "oppressed", Kumudtai asserts that it is true that the "entire woman caste is dalit", but the "Indian dalit woman is the most dalit (oppressed) among all women" (Trans. in Rege 2018: 316). Such a projection of Indian marginalized women as being subservient to their counterparts in the world can only reinforce India's subalternity *vis-à-vis* that of its counterparts found elsewhere. Going a step further, one

may argue, if the subaltern is one of the many constituents of history, it critiques the very notion of history and presupposes a reconstruction of history of Indian women in the light of subalternity. In this context we may refer to Dipesh Chakrabarty[12] who contends that, as regards history as an academic discourse, Europe occupies the central sovereign position, and *ipso facto*, "'Indian' history itself is in a position of subalternity; one can only articulate subaltern subject positions in the name of this history" (1996: 223).

Kumudtai also relates the struggle of her upbringing in a highly discriminative caste-based society. She relates how she was debarred from learning Sanskrit at school level, how she was continually discouraged by her teachers, and how, despite all her oddities and adversities, she successfully became a Professor of Sanskrit. At every stage of her career – as a little girl, a student, a teacher and a social reformer – what was tellingly common and what had not undergone any change was discrimination against a Dalit woman. As a student she was exposed to taunt and banter from 'savarna' or upper-class people during her days in Morris College, and even the same sense of discrimination prevailed during her university days. Kumudtai completed her masters in Sanskrit – a subject she took up in her career chiefly at the instance and continual encouragement of her school teacher Gokhale Guruji – and was felicitated by the Vice-Chancellor of the university.

Later when Kumudtai applied for a job as a lecturer in a college, she had to go through the bitterest moments of discrimination and humiliation from some of the experts on the screening committee. Almost everywhere she became the object of ridicule and prejudice, because the upper-class people were jealous of Kumudtai on account of a rare scholarship of Sanskrit being possessed by a Dalit student, and also because she had applied for a post reserved for scheduled caste candidates. A woman of indomitable mental strength, Kumudtai, instead of pocketing the continual onslaughts of such taunt, wrote a letter of protest to the central minister Babu Jagjivan Ram who forwarded it to the then-Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Impressed by Kumudtai's boldness and her invulnerable logic, Nehru offered her a prize money of two hundred and fifty rupees and directed the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Yeshwantrao Chavan to redress her problem. But when Chavan tried to parry the issue tactfully by suggesting Kumudtai that she should pursue research in order to get a service as a lecturer, Kumudtai offered her waspish rejoinder to him in unambiguous terms:

> Saheb, if you cannot give me a job, tell me so frankly. I do not want false promises. False promises give life to false hopes. Research can result from mental well-being.

> How do you expect me to have a healthy mind on an empty stomach? (Trans. in Rege 2018: 330–331)

After two years of hardship and humiliation, Kumudtai got a job as a lecturer in Sanskrit in a government college, and later as a Professor of Sanskrit in her alma mater.

As a lecturer, Kumudtai noticed, much to her dismay, how Dalit students were discriminated against by their teachers who gave them poor marks at the internal examinations, so that they may not have the prerequisite marks to apply for the government jobs reserved for marginal candidates. While her scholarship and her appointment as a lecturer were appreciated by people of her Dalit community, the upper-class people scoffed at her for getting a job through the reservation quota, and made snide remarks about her competence. But it was her students whose genuine appreciation overwhelmed her with a sense of satisfaction. Equipped with the gift of the gab, Kumudtai nibbled at every opportunity of replying back to those people who had been unfavorable to her because of her caste. Thus, when requested to introduce Sanskrit pundits in a conference, pat came her sharp sardonic rejoinder:

> Where women and shudras have been denied the right to study Sanskrit by the *Smritis*, the fact that a shudra woman from an untouchable caste is introducing Sanskrit pundits heralds the progressive mindset of independent India. (Trans. in Rege 2018: 326)

Yes, Kumudtai indeed embodies the "progressive mindset of independent India", and her story is that of a Dalit girl's success, fighting almost single-handedly against the forces of caste and gender discrimination. Significantly, the very title of Kumudtai's autobiography – "Thoughtful Outburst" – brings out the two governing traits of her character: her rationality, and her ability to unleash her uninhibited protest against social discriminations. It is a tale of a sportive girl who overcame the insurmountable hurdles of casteism and its concomitant discrimination and prejudices to reach the highest ladder of academic achievement, and a tale of her arduous journey from subjugation to subjecthood, to borrow Preeti Dewan's metaphor, from the margin to the center.

Research Findings

The findings of this essay may be treated as a staple for further research, inasmuch as each of these findings may be further critiqued and contested. Thus, rather than elaborate on

each within the purview of this essay, I will succinctly enumerate the major trends in Dalit women's autobiographies as exemplified through my discussion of three sample autobiographies.

a) The advent of an indigenous literary genre

The very idea of writing Dalit women's narratives provides the advent of an indigenous literary genre never found hitherto. Dalit women's narratives are also meant to counter the narratives written by their male counterparts, and by doing so, provide a suitable alternative to them. Unlike the autobiographies written by upper-class non-Dalit writers where there is a conscious effort of self-fetishism and exhibiting one's accomplishments, these autobiographies, more or less, project the seamy and sordid side of the lives of their authors passing through hardship, struggles, adversities and vicissitudes. Thus, while highlighting the arduous struggle of these Dalit women, these autobiographies delight in a sort of deglamorization and deromanticization of life.

b) Resistance against institutionalized power structures

These narratives register a protest against the traditional power structures, and thus articulate the postcolonial sensibility in terms of refusing to be treated as marginal or peripheral. Thus, these autobiographies register the anti-establishment voice and the voice of dissent, rather than that of conformity and acquiescence. It is this voice of resistance against established institutionalized, hegemonic power structures – the religious Brahmanical power structure, as well as the elite upper-class power structure – that characterizes all the Dalit autobiographies.

c) The self as the replica of society

These autobiographies wonderfully telescope the subjective and the objective to offer us a dystopian chronicle of contemporary Dalit society and Dalit women through the subjective lens of the individual. Dalit narratives negotiate between the self and the community. The self becomes the antenna and reflector of the community. As P. K. Nayar so cogently suggests: "Dalit *testimonio* places the individual's story within the public domain, in a discourse that makes the story shareable with others" (2008: 110). Preeti Dewan follows in Nayar's footsteps, and puts it so wonderfully:

> The 'I' of canonical/bourgeois autobiographies, an autonomous, discreet and sovereign self is replaced by a communal 'we' and subjectivity is rendered more complex by the interplay between the individual and the community, without loss of either (2016: 223).

d) Critique of Dalit identity as an "Other"

Almost all the Dalit narratives exemplify how their protagonists revolted against their ostracization, deprivation, exploitation and social exclusion. They strongly protested against their stigmatized identity as 'Dalits'. But the very consciousness of being a 'Dalit' poses an intrinsic problem to these writers who could not but fail to erase their identity as a 'Dalit', i.e., as being intrinsically subservient to a more powerful group, and as being treated as the 'other'. Thus, through these autobiographies the Dalit writers tried to blur this binary between 'this' and the 'other', and to defy and even subvert the very notion of otherness.

e) Tripartite roles assumed by Dalit writers

Every Dalit writer assumes three-dimensional roles in these autobiographies – (a) as a writer and chronicler; (b) as a social critic and analyzer; and (c) as a social reformer. The writings interrogate the role of the community at large. They interrogate the deliberate erasure of their issues in men's narratives.

f) Double-edged oppression

The Dalit women's autobiographies engender their vulnerability to double-edged oppression, or, to use Spivak's phrase, "double displacement", which I have already referred to. As Raj Kumar puts it: "While Dalit men are victims of caste and class oppression, Dalit women find themselves as the victims of double oppression – by the upper-caste men as well as by the men of their own community" (2010: 6). And this "double displacement" is manifested at the varied levels of caste, class, religion, gender, and even personal relationship, so that these autobiographies may be read as complex sites of ambivalence, contestation, and plurality.

g) Verisimilitude

Verisimilitude is the hallmark of these autobiographies where there is a candid and unabashed disclosure of the crude and harsh realities of life, and where one does not find any attempt at hushing up a naked truth (say, for instance, domestic violence), as may sometimes be found in autobiographies written by non-Dalits. Rooted in the excruciating physical sufferings of the marginalized group, the Dalit literature in general is geared to "giving extraordinary pain" engendered in the real lives of an oppressed community (Limbale 2004: 108).

h) Language of clinical realism

The language in which these autobiographies are rendered subverts the conventional language of traditional autobiographies. Since most of these Dalit writers, barring a very few, did not enjoy the fruits of education, their tales are told in colloquial, informal language devoid

of any rhetorical ornamentation. Furthermore, scorched in the searing heat of poverty and deprivation, it is quite natural that they cannot be invested with a poetic or even formal idiom of expression. As Kumud Pawade in her autobiography so pertinently observes, "[i]t is impossible to expect soft language when dalit women's honour and self-respect is being dragged into the mud" (Trans. in Rege 2018: 313). Thus, these autobiographies are often couched in frank clinical realism, and sometimes steeped in snide, scurrilous, tabooed expressions with which the Dalits actually conversed among themselves. As Raj Kumar rightly observes:

> The vehicle is often the brute, coarse, and crude language of the slum, springing from a life of poverty, ignorance and violence. The jaggedness of word, the granulated structure, the rough-hewn expression, the scarcely muted anger – anger which may spit fire like wrath, burn lambently like satire, scorch like cynicism, kindle like anguish, and enflame like tragedy... (2010: 148)

i) An alternative historiography

These autobiographies tend to subvert the established historiographical representation of women by offering an alternative historiography. "Subaltern historiography in India", argues P.K. Nayar, "draws attention to the way the supposedly democratic Indian nation has been constructed through a process of exclusion and marginalization of the Dalitbahujan,[13] women, and the working classes" (2008: 11). Following in the footsteps of Ranajit Guha, one may safely infer that these autobiographies constitute a typical distinctive and autonomous domain independent of both the colonial masters and the native elites. Contrary to Dipesh Chakraborty's claim that historical knowledge in the third world is produced under Eurocentric dominance, these Dalit women have a distinct historical genesis and growth.

j) Critique of cultural representation

These autobiographies also interrogate, subvert and dismantle the culture of the nation by laying bare the dirty spots on the brow of an otherwise glorious cultural heritage.

k) Critique of feminist representations

Dalit narratives tend to subvert the predominant cultural representations of Indian women chiseled by non-Dalit feminists, and therefore demand a distinct idiom and space of articulation. Coupled with the denominator of caste, the gender issues of Dalit narratives have become a contested zone of debates and research.[14]

l) Critique of nationalism

These autobiographies prick the bubble of the inflated nationalism and its inevitable corollary: independence. Kumud Sarvagod's autobiography, for example, offers a stinging and cynical critique of Indian independence which fails to guarantee any improvement to the Dalits who have to eke out a bare survival by sweating their guts out.

m) Sites of contestation and complexities

Dalit autobiographies are more than autobiographies. They emerge from a socio-political context, and are politically engaged, and open up vistas of what Debjani Ganguly calls "ever-expanding lexicon of political modernity" (2005: 129). Thus, these narratives cannot be divorced from the political crucible from which they emerge. These life-narratives subscribe to Benita Parry's observation that "the native woman is constructed within multiple social relationships and positioned as the product of different class, caste, and cultural specificities" (1987: 35), and thus they become sites where contestations, ambiguities, complexities and conflicting voices clash and coalesce.

Conclusions

By telling their own tales – an act analogous to the slave narratives written by slaves in the context of American slavery – the Dalit women offer us faithful chronicles of suffering, deprivation and oppression, but more importantly, emerge as writers-cum-reformers. Furthermore, rather than being armchair accounts of an age of social discrimination, these narratives are filtered through real, and often excruciating, life experiences of these Dalit women, which is why these narratives are marked by both verisimilitude and vividness. The dual roles played by the Dalit women in these autobiographies – that of a writer writing from her experiences distilled through her life, and that of a social reformer critiquing the conditions of women during the author's contemporary times – give their narratives a uniqueness in that in them one finds a perfect conflation of the subjective and the objective. These autobiographies also serve as faithful antennas to reflect the angst of the contemporary caste-ridden Indian society through the painful chronicles of these women.

Although Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that "Europe works as a silent referent in historical knowledge", and that "[t]the dominance of 'Europe' as the subject of all histories is a part of a much more profound theoretical condition under which historical knowledge is produced in the third world" (1996: 224), it goes without saying that the autobiographies of these Dalit women would repudiate such a claim. Suffice it to say, these autobiographies have distinct geneses of their own, and are absolutely independent of both Europe and colonialism.

This independent and autonomous status of these autobiographies subscribes to Ranajit Guha's contention expressed in the earlier part of this essay. Finally, one may conclude that in stark contrast to Spivak's shibboleth that the subalterns cannot speak, these autobiographies have repudiated such a claim, and have substantiated that the subalterns can speak, that they have spoken, and whenever and wherever there is social discrimination against them, they will speak again.

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[1] Written during 1934–1935 when Gramsci was imprisoned in Facist Italy under Mussolini, many of his comments are presented in such a way as to avert suspicion of his authority.

[2] For a more informed view of Guha's contribution to Subaltern Studies, see Ranajit Guha, ed. *Subaltern Studies*. 5 Vols. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982–1986.

[3] The essay originally appeared in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988, 271-313. Much later in 2010, this paper was republished by Columbia University Press and edited by Rosalind C. Morris. In this paper I have used the citation from Rosalind Morris, ed. *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/morr14384. Accessed September 30, 2021.

[4] Quoted by Spivak from Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 212.

[5] Ranajit Guha, ed. *Subaltern Studies I*, p. 4.

[6] In the Marathi language the word "Dalit" also means belonging to the soil, and thus borders on a sense of something which has been made to lie down on the ground. The semantic resonances of the term "Dalit" have extended its scope to subsume any oppressed group, and also the landless land farm laborers and the tribal in India.

[7] This verse occurs in *Manusmriti* (translated by George Buhler as *The Laws of Manu*), chapter 9, verse number 3. See, George Buhler, (trans.). *The Laws of Manu.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), chapter 9, verse number 3.

[8] For an informed view of such works one may consult Padmini Swaminathan, ed. *Women and Work* (Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan, 2012); Bratati Biswas, and Ranjana Kaul, eds. *Women and Empowerment in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Worldview, 2016); Debjani Ganguly, *Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds: Postcolonial Perspectives* (Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan, 2005); Kumkum Sangari, and Sudesh Vaid, eds. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006); Sumit Sarkar, and Tanika Sarkar, eds. *Women and Social Reforms in Modern India: A Reader*, 2 vols. (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007); Sanchari Roy Mukherjee, ed. *Indian Women: Broken Words, Distant Dreams* (Kolkata: Levant Books, 2007).

[9] "Savarna" means belonging to the upper caste.

[10] Rupee is the standard unit of the Indian currency. One rupee is made of one hundred paise or paisa.

[11] "Partha Chatterjee, Reflections on Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Morris, pp. 110–116.

[12] See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for the 'Indian' Pasts?", in Padmini Mongia, ed., *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (New Delhi: O.U.P., 1996), 223–247.

[13] The word "bahujan" is a Pali word meaning many. The Dalits were also sometimes known as "bahujans" or "Dalitbahujans" as they reflected the sensibility of most of the oppressed marginalized people. In India there is also a political Party called Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) founded by Kanshi Ram in 1984, comprising the people belonging to the minority groups.

[14] In fact, much light has been shed on this area. Dalit feminism itself has become a separate branch of potential research. It was Gopal Guru's essay "Dalit Women Talk Differently" (1995) that mooted the point that Dalit women have an idiom of expression which is different from that of their non-Dalit counterparts, and it created a whirlwind of critical debates, spawning later research. For recent stimulating research in this area, see F. Franco, J. Macwan, and S. Ramanathan, eds. *The Silken Swing:*

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Оригинални научни чланак

Главни токови у аутобиографијама далитских жена у Индији

Далити, који су у Индији на периферији друштва, створили су сопствени глас протестујући против очите маргинализације у друштву заснованом на кастама, што им је помогло да освоје централну позицију у књижевности. Најновији изданци далитске књижевности јесу аутобиографије далитских жена које су биле жртве двоструке опресије, од стране виших каста и услед патријархалног уређења међу Далитима. Ове аутобиографије су јединствене на много начина и веран су одраз дистопијске патње далитских жена, као и историјски запис о тој патњи. Овај рад настоји да смести њихове аутобиографије у друштвено-политички контекст индијских Далита, као и да утврди главне токове унутар њих. На крају долазимо до важних закључака на основу субалтерних студија и покушавамо да утврдимо како индивидуални гласови далитских жена артикулисани у овим аутобиографијама одбацују контроверзну тврдњу Гајатри Спивак да подређени не могу да говоре.

Кључне речи: постколонијално, каста, Далити, аутобиографије, субалтерне студије