



Theme of Resistance in *The Prison We Broke and The Weave of My Life*

Rajni Kanwar

Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies (MIL&LS), University of Delhi INDIA

Email: 999rajnikanwar@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: In this paper I want to explore the theme of Resistance which is very common in Dalit writings. Sometimes their resistance is against the dominant class, sometimes it is against economic deprivation and the other time it is strongly against the age old caste system. Earlier Dalit Literature was not given a prominent place in the mainstream literature but by the efforts of Dalit writers this scenario has been changed. Today Dalit Literature has acquired a significant place amongst other literature. In fact, Dalit Literary Studies have also been introduced in several universities. The notion of Caste is very crucial for understanding the system of structural inequalities. Dalits have often been marginalized and oppressed in several ways. Therefore, it can be said that this discrimination was the major factor which gave birth to resistance. Although, the term “resistance” should not only be seen in a negative manner because sometimes resistance is very essential in bringing up a social transformation in the society. I have selected two autobiographies namely *The Prison We Broke* and *The Weave of My Life* which are written by dalit female writers to depict the discriminatory system prevailed in the society and the harsh realities faced by dalit people. Autobiographies are generally considered personal narratives which provide a first-hand account of their experience and struggle for human dignity. For many Dalit writers literature has become a medium to raise their voice against the evil power of oppression and injustice. In their narratives they depict how their people have been exploited and treated inhumanly in everyday social life. Thus, these poor down trodden people ended up in a life full of pain and misery. In the last section I also want to discuss the role of B. R. Ambedkar in spreading awareness amongst the masses regarding their rights. He believed that the role of education is very important for social emancipation and eliminating the discriminatory attitude of upper caste people.

KEYWORDS: dalit literature, mainstream literature, marginalization, inequality, resistance, caste system, social emancipation

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the issue of “resistance” in the autobiographies of Dalit literature. Dalit literature is incomplete without resistance. Time and again it is seen as a very common theme in almost all the writings by dalit writers. Dalit autobiographies portray a very touching account of the unfair treatment they met through the hands of upper cast people. They speak in a very personal tone and describe how they have never been considered as “favorites” by Hinduism. It is crucial to question how a book of laws (*Manusmriti*) can determine the codes for people of specific castes or more importantly how can it discriminate between people in general preserving only the rights of brahmins. But before going to the main theme it is very crucial to

understand two terms, that is ‘Dalit’ and ‘Dalit Literature’.

WHO ARE DALITS

Dalits are generally considered as “untouchables”, they are the deprived ones. The tyrannical system of Caste has distorted their identities and hinders the path of their progress. Urmila Pawar also argues that the category of ‘dalit’ is a “radical, rational-humanist category developed in the rebellion of those and humiliated by the social system.”¹ There has been various definitions of the word “dalit”. Mini Krishnan writes Dalit is a Marathi word which means “of the soil or the earth.”² Whereas in her introduction to *Sangati* Lakshmi Holmstrom writes that the word ‘Dalit’ means ‘oppressed’ or ‘ground down.’³ According to her, “. . . the

word 'Dalit' was first used by Ambedkar in preference to his own earlier term, 'Scheduled Castes', it only gained common currency following what might be called the second wave of the Marathi Dalit movement, that is to say, with the founding of the Dalit Panthers in 1972."⁴

The stigma of caste is difficult to delete. In his book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* Sharankumar Limbale writes "For centuries, Dalits, branded untouchables, remained outcast. The Hindu Varna system imposed slavery on them. They were tortured for a long time. Such was the condition of the outcaste communities that they had neither a village nor a home."⁵ They were often seen as "other" who were not respected as individuals. It was the reason that they were assigned menial jobs like removing the skin from the dead animal and cleaning the latrines. According to him "human beings"⁶ are responsible for all this exploitation and slavery. Limbale opines that "Dalit enable the purity of upper caste society, and become impure in the process."⁷

DALIT LITERATURE

Dalit Literature focuses on the prime issue of "otherness, difference and marginality . . ."⁸ It awakes the slept consciousness of people of all castes. It became a medium to raise their "voice". They do not want their histories of discrimination to be erased hence they preserved it in the works of literature so that next generation can read and understand their life accounts. The writers of Dalit literature keep a specific purpose in their mind and bring forth the issues related to caste and class. Raje Dhale, Namdeo Dhasal, and Baburao Bagul were some of the writers of Dalit Literature who united together for the sake of Dalit's rights who are generally considered as "depressed classes."⁹

A lot of writers also come ahead as activists to support Dalit Panthers Movement which was designed on Black Panthers Movement. N. Shanthanaik asserts that ". . . Dalit panthers drew parallels between caste and race and compared themselves with the Blacks."¹⁰ So, it can be said that dalits have constantly been struggling for creating and asserting their identity. The recorded account of events in Dalit literature highlights how their memories of discrimination are still alive in their minds. It is hard to erase those memories because it has been imprinted on their psyche.

Dalit literature narrates the personal and social story of survival with a stigmatized life. The works of Dalit writers is not just about a story of their life, it is also about their feelings, emotions, and experiences of how it is to be a marginalized person among the non-marginalized. According to Lakshmi Holmstrom, "Dalit Literature describes the world differently, from a Dalit perspective."¹¹ They express their unheard experiences and try to deconstruct their traditional identity. It is said that the language of Dalit literature is the language of "cultural revolution."¹² Sharankumar Limbale writes:

'Rejection' and 'revolt' in Dalit literature have been birthed from the womb of Dalits' pain. They are directed against an inhuman system that was imposed on them. Just as the anguish expressed in Dalit Literature is in the nature of a collective social voice, similarly, the rejection and revolt are social and collective. This rejection is aimed at the unequal order which has exploited Dalits. Its form is double-edged—rejecting the unequal order, and demanding equality, liberty, fraternity and Justice. . . ."¹³

Thus, Dalit literature presents an authentic account of the traumatic life of dalits. It can fairly be seen as a "literature of resistance" which rejects the sick mentality of upper castes. Through the medium of autobiography they narrate their story of survival and rebellion. In her essay Kanchan Verma mentions "The resistance was a way of their struggle for survival."¹⁴

RESISTANCE IN DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

I have discussed how Dalits have often been subjected to caste base discrimination. A lot of writers like Baby Kamble, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Arjun Dangle, Urmila Pawar, Bama and Daya Pawar have tried to express their harsh experience through their personal narratives. It is just not the "self" they talk about they also speaks about their "community". The autobiographies written by these writers can be read as personal narratives of "resistance". Their major focus is to depict the marginal reality of Dalits. They can often be seen questioning the factor of "otherness" and theirs voice is the "voice of protest". Here the question arises what is the need of protest? The answer to this lies in their daily subjugation and oppression.

Not only men but women were also suppressed by the dominant community. Their conditions were more pathetic as compared to dalit men. In her autobiography *The Prison We Broke* Baby Kamble talks about how the women of dalit community were often silenced. Moreover they were forced to live an isolated life. She has tried to recollect all the experience that her community has lived. She also asserts that the people of her community should discard the superstitious beliefs which have chained them.

Marginalization was very natural because they were considered low-born untouchable people. They were denied of all opportunities which would have raised their status. Ambedkar supports this claim he writes that because of the reason of untouchability ". . . higher posts in the public service . . . is not within their reach."¹⁵ Limbale also writes on the notion of untouchability, he writes ". . . in the Indian social system, freedom from untouchability cannot be bought as it is imposed from birth."¹⁶ Therefore it was believed that their mere touch can pollute an upper class person and hence a distance was maintained from them. This notion challenged the mind of little Baby who wanted to touch the idol of Lord Rama to show her protest against the touchable ones. Thus, her autobiography can be seen as a text of

resistance which was originally written in Marathi language.

Kamble questions the visible reality of caste which was unseen by upper caste writers. She tries to show her anger against cast hierarchy, she highlights how the dominating Brahminical community exploited poor women. Her work offers a well formulated critique of Dalit Patriarchal system. She mentions that dalit women are also subjugated within dalit patriarchal community.

According to Raj Kumar, the situation of dalit women are very pathetic, “. . . they are the most underprivileged group left out at the bottom of the hierarchal caste society for centuries. Compared to Dalit men, they suffer more due to their dual disadvantage Being Dalit, they suffer due to caste discrimination. And being women, they become the victims of the patriarchal social order in their families and outside.”¹⁷ Kamble also narrates the story of how her mother was caged as a bird when she was a child. It was hard to break the rigid structure of patriarchal system because they were not allowed to transgress their boundaries. She also mentions about gender discrimination and associates herself with the sufferings of her community people. She believes that ignorance is the main cause behind their subjugation.

She depicts her resistance by indulging herself in the fight for Dalit Women’s rights. In his book *Dalit Personal Narratives* Kumar mentions that “The Dalit women who had been privileged to participate in Ambedkar’s movements later organized Dalit women from across India under the aegis of Dalit women’s movement.”¹⁸ He also believed that:

Ambedkar mobilized a large number of Dalit women[but] All his movements were targeted to achieve equality and social justice by critiquing the age-old caste practices supported by the

Brahmanic law. He advocated the annihilation of caste to achieve social equality. Ambedkar gave education top priority in his movements to break the monopoly of the upper castes, who generally controlled the knowledge system.¹⁹

In her text Baby Kamble highlights the psychological impact of Ambedkarite movement which changed her life. She also talks about the value of education which is very important for their emancipation.

Similar theme of “resistance” to the hegemonic caste system can also be traced in Urmila Pawar’s autobiography *The Weave of My Life*. It is just not a personal memoir as she also talks about the marginalization of her entire Mahar community because of their caste. According to Limbale the “caste” of a dalit is the source of a “never ending pain.”²⁰ In her text Pawar portrays how Mahars were subjected to non-humanitarian behavior. She describes “the house of Marathas and the Brahmins were at some distance from our house. Bhandari and Kulwadi women could drink water from their wells but untouchable women were

absolutely forbidden to do so. This was a permanent wound in Baba’s heart.”²¹

She has portrayed a very heart-rending experience of untouchability and describes how the so called “touchable” people avoid the contact of dalits “They made me stand at the threshold; I put the baskets down and they sprinkled water on them to wash away the pollution. They would drop coins in my hands from above, avoiding contact, as if their hands would have burnt had they touched me.”²² This depiction illustrates a discriminative attitude of the upper castes, “It is as if a Dalit has an actual disease such as leprosy.”²³ She further projects how dalits were living in hapless conditions and were given leftover foods.

Pawar openly reveals that her discourse is related with dalit women’s sexuality. She talks about how the lives of dalit women are shackled with the rigid sets of patriarchal notions. She reckons that it is important to raise voice against these patriarchal ideologies. Thus, her autobiography can be seen as an essential text which critiques both dalit patriarchy and issues related to gender biasness.

She also mentions Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who comes as a savior figure for dalits. Her text records “the travails and transformation of the Mahar community on the threshold of an epistemic transformation under the leadership of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar”²⁴ The propagation of his ideology enkindled a sort of resistance in their hearts. It also helped dalits to understand how they have been used as tools because of their ignorance. This kind of mass awareness assisted them to think that they too have equal rights to live like any upper caste person. Alike Baby Kamble, Pawar also voiced that Education is very important in changing their social status. She narrates one instance where her father wanted her to study in a school. Therefore she believes that education is such a potential tool that can empower them to take up job opportunities and moreover it is the link which can connect them to the mainstream society.

ROLE OF AMBEDKAR

Ambedkar belongs to a Mahar community. He himself faced caste based discrimination which kindled a fire of revolution in his heart. This revolution can be seen as a form of resistance which itself symbolizes a desire for freedom from the hegemonic power of Upper castes. Dalits were often kept “apart” and it was believed that they are only born to serve the upper class hence they have no role to play in the mainstream society. Almost every day they have to undergo through the demonic behavior which basically happened because they were born as low caste people. Moreover the problem of untouchability reduced them to a state of helplessness and resulted in social exclusion.

It is important to analyse which factor determines the discriminatory attitude of the upper castes. Earlier shudras were marginalized on the basis of their birth

which is quite unreasonable. A person himself or herself cannot decide to be born in an upper or lower caste, then why this discrimination is rooted so deeply? It is important to understand the views of Ambedkar on caste based hierarchal system. Chaturvarnya system is a “degrading system of social organization” considered Ambedkar “which deadens, paralyses and cripples the people from helpful activity.”²⁵ He was of the view that this hierarchal system distinguishes people between high and low which gives birth to inequality.

Ambedkar demanded justice, he wrote “Justice has always evoked ideas of equality . . . [but] Hinduism does not recognize equality . . . [It] is inimical to equality, antagonistic to liberty and opposed to fraternity.”²⁶ He was of the opinion that the varna system which was initiated by Manu is the root cause behind this inequality. Later he underwent religious conversion and adopted Buddhism. His conversion of religion can be viewed as an act of resistance and rejection of Hinduism.

Some people misconstrue the statements given by Ambedkar, they believed that Ambedkar was against religion, but it is not the reality. He was never against the cast system but discrimination. He desired for an inclusive society where shudras can equally participate in every sphere. He was aware of the fact that marginalization obstructs the path of development. Therefore he strongly supported education for masses and especially for women, in his book *Philosophy of Hinduism* he writes “Education everyone must have. Means of defence everyone must have. These are the paramount requirements of every man for his self-preservation.”²⁷

CONCLUSION

So to conclude it can be said that earlier dalits lived an unprivileged and deprived life. The caste prejudices led them to live a life of exclusion and alienation. Due to their caste they were ostracized and hence excommunicated from the society. All this kinds of discrimination and inequality faced by them gave birth to resistance which was helpful in bringing up radical changes. It considerably took a long time to uplift them but this does not mean that discrimination based on caste has been completely removed from the society. Untouchability is still prevailed, I suggest that this negative attitude of people towards the low castes is very essential to change for bringing a transformation in a casteist society and it is equally important for the development of our nation as well

1. Sharmila Rege, afterword to *The Weave of My Life*, by Urmila Pawar (Kolkata: Stree 2008), 323-324.
2. Mini Krishnan, editor’s note to *Karukku*, by Bama New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), xxv.
3. Lakshmi Holmstrom, introduction to *Sangati*, by Bama (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), xii.

4. Ibid., xi.
5. Sharankumar Limbale, “Dalit Literature and African American Literature,” in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, ed. and trans. Alok Mukherjee (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2004), 83.
6. Ibid.
7. Sharankumar Limbale, “From Erasure to Assertion,” in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, ed. and trans. Alok Mukherjee (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2004)
8. Putul Sathe, “Reading Resistance in Dalit Women’s Autobiographies,” in *Literature and Social Change*, ed. Parmod Kumar Mehra (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2015), 169.
9. B. R. Ambedkar, *Swaraj and the Depressed* (New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2010),
10. Shamala Ratnakar, “Contesting Caste: Dalit Assertion and Discourse,” in *Intraspection and Retraspection of Dalit Literature*, ed. N. Shanthanaik (New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers, 2014), 107.
11. Lakshmi Holmstrom, introduction to *Sangati*, by Bama (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), xii.
12. Sharankumar Limbale, “Dalit Literature and African American Literature,” in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, ed. and trans. Alok Mukherjee (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2004), 102.
13. Sharankumar Limbale, “Dalit Literature: Form and Purpose,” in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, ed. and trans. Alok Mukherjee (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2004), 31.
14. Kanchan Verma, “Plural Resistance in Dalit Autobiographies,” in *Literature and Social Change*, ed. Parmod Kumar Mehra (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2015), 121.
15. B. R. Ambedkar, *Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables* (New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2006), 18.
16. Sharankumar Limbale, “Dalit Literature and African American Literature,” in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, ed. and trans. Alok Mukherjee (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2004), 85.
17. Raj Kumar, “Beyond the Margin: Dalit Women’s Autobiographies,” in *Dalit Personal Narratives* (Noida: Orient Blackswan, 2010), 217.
18. Ibid., 214.
19. Ibid.
20. Sharankumar Limbale, “Dalit Literature and African American Literature,” in *Towards an*

- Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, ed. and trans. Alok Mukherjee (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2004), 100.
21. Urmila Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, trans. Maya Pandit (Kolkata: Stree, 2008), 23.
 22. *Ibid.*, 65.
 23. Raman Sutradhar, "Dalit Movement in India: In the light of four Dalit Literatures," *Journal of Dental and Medical Sciences* 13, no. 4 (April 2014): 93, accessed October 22, 2017, <http://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jdms/papers/Vol13-issue4/Version-5/U013459197.pdf>.
 24. Maya Pandit, introduction to *The Weave of My Life*, by Urmila Pawar (Kolkata: Stree, 2008), xv.
 25. B. R. Ambedkar, *Philosophy of Hinduism* (New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2010), 61.
 26. *Ibid.*, 22-57.
 27. *Ibid.*, 60.
- Ratnakar, Shamala. "Contesting Caste: Dalit Assertion and Discourse." In *Intraspection and Retraspection of Dalit Literature*, edited by N. Shanthanaik, 100-109. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers, 2014.
- Rege, Sharmila. Afterword to *The Weave of My Life*, by Urmila Pawar, 323-345. Kolkata: Stree, 2008.
- Sathe, Putul. "Reading Resistance in Dalit Women's Autobiographies." In *Literature and Social Change*, edited by Parmod Kumar Mehra, 169-178. Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2015.
- Sutradhar, Raman. "Dalit Movement in India: In the light of four Dalit Literatures." *Journal of Dental and Medical Sciences* 13, no. 4 (April 2014): 91-97. Accessed October 22, 2017. <http://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jdms/papers/Vol13-issue4/Version-5/U013459197.pdf>.
- Verma, Kanchan. "Plural Resistance in Dalit Autobiographies." In *Literature and Social Change*, edited by Parmod Kumar Mehra, 107-142. Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2015.

REFERENCES

- Ambedkar, B. R. Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables. New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2006.
- . *Philosophy of Hinduism*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2010.
- . *Swaraj and the Depressed*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2010.
- Holmstrom, Lakshmi. Introduction to *Sangati*, by Bama, xi-xxii. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. Translated by Maya Pandit. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009.
- Krishnan, Mini. Editor's note to *Karukku*, by Bama, xxv. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Kumar, Raj. "Beyond the Margin: Dalit Women's Autobiographies." In *Dalit Personal Narratives*, 210-256. Noida: Orient Blackswan, 2010.
- Limbale, Sharankumar. "Dalit Literature and African American Literature." In *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, edited and translated by Alok Mukherjee, 82-102. Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2004.
- . "Dalit Literature: Form and Purpose." In *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, edited and translated by Alok Mukherjee, 23-39. Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2004.
- . "Reading Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: From Erasure to Assertion*." In *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, edited and translated by Alok Mukherjee, 1-18. Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2004.
- Pandit, Maya. Introduction to *The Weave of My Life*, by Urmila Pawar, xiv-xxxiii. Kolkata: Stree, 2008.
- Pawar, Urmila. *The Weave of My Life*. Translated by Maya Pandit. Kolkata: Stree, 2008.