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The Doubly Marginalized Self in 20th Century Dalit Autobiographies

20. Yüzyıl Dalit Otobiyografilerinde Çifte Marjinalleştirilmiş Benlik

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Abstract

This paper situates the genre of autobiography in the context of Indian society, which is divided on the basis of caste, lowest among them being Dalits. The two Dalit autobiographies discussed in the paper are Surajpal Chauhan's *Tiraskrit* and Kausalya Baisantri's *Dohra Abhishaap*. The idea of a divided Dalit community is explored through a reading of these narratives as both of them represent the margin within the marginal Dalit community. Chauhan's narrative explores the caste divide within the socially discriminated Dalit community, and Baisantri explores the issue of obliteration of Dalit women's voice in Indian society, even within the Dalit community. Both the narratives are voicing issues pertinent to the Dalit community, thus emerging as a socially and politically informed self that is no longer marginal.

Keywords

Marginalization, Dalit writing, Dalit women's writing, autobiography, caste, Indian literature

Öz

Bu çalışma, otobiyografi türünü, en alttakileri Dalitlerin oluşturduğu kast temelli bölünmüş Hint toplumu bağlamında ele almaktadır. Çalışma, iki Dalit otobiyografisine odaklanmakta: ilki, Surajpal Chauhan'ın *Tiraskrit* adlı eseri, ikincisi ise Kausalya Baisantri'nin *Dohra Abhishaap* adlı eseri. Bölünmüş bir Dalit topluluğu fikri, her ikisi de marjinal Dalit topluluğu içinde kenara itilmiş yaşamları temsil eden bu iki eser bağlamında mercek altına alınıyor. Chauhan'ın anlatısı toplumsal olarak ayrımcılığa uğrayan Dalit topluluğu içindeki kast ayrımını, Baisantri ise Dalit kadınların Hint toplumunda, hatta Dalit topluluğu içinde bile seslerinin duyulmayışını irdelemektedir. Her iki anlatı da Dalit toplumunu ilgilendiren meseleleri dile getirmekte ve böylece marjinal olmaktan çıkıp sosyal ve siyasi olarak bilinçli bir benlik oluşturmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Marjinalleştirme, Dalit yazını, Dalit kadın yazını, otobiyografi, kast sistemi, Hint edebiyatı

An autobiography can be defined as an account of a person's life, most often written by that person. It can be understood as a distinct double of a person's life. In his book, *Dalit Personal Narratives,* Raj Kumar describes the term autobiography "by splitting it into its three components: auto-self, bio-life, graph-writing."[1] Thus, the idea of self, life and the process of writing becomes integral to any discussion of this genre. Autobiography is a genre which is heavily shaped by the presence of the writer from the beginning to the end of the narrative. This makes the text a property of the writer because of the existence of the signature of the author in the tale. There are two selves that the narrator must confront, that is, the public and the private self. The former is visible to everyone and involves personal appearance and social relationships. The second self, however, is experienced only by the narrator. This is an experience of the self that he cannot put into words, and hence, it remains a private self. In other words, it is a primal self that exists outside and beyond the symbolic realm of human language. The self that comes into view in one's autobiography is, James Olney writes, "the 'I' that coming awake to its own being shapes and determines the nature of the autobiography and in so doing half discovers, half creates itself."[2] The self that we read in the narrative is, thus, a construction of the real self of the narrator. Thus, writing of autobiography is not an objective pursuit, rather one of personal justification. There exists a wide difference between the stated objective of undertaking the task of writing an autobiography to simply trace the events of a person's life as they happened, and the final result which appears more like an apologia.

The self is a significant, or rather indispensable, entity in autobiography, for in such narratives "there is an 'I' informing the whole and making its presence felt at every critical point, and without this 'I,' stated or implied, the work would collapse into mere insignificance."[3] Olney writes that even though the self of the narrator is not known at the beginning of the narrative as a complete entity, "the *bios* of an autobiography, we may say, is what the 'I' makes of it."[4] Kumar's argument furthers this idea when he discusses the author's personality and writes, "The location of the narrative self is also an important subject of investigation in autobiographical studies. The identity of a person will be based on the location to which he/she belongs."[5] This statement stands true when we discuss autobiographies by marginal communities, as while studying the self that emerges in these writings, the precise location of the protagonist is crucial in making sense of the struggles the writer has gone through in his/her life to be able to live the kind of life they are leading now. The same is also observed while studying Dalit autobiographies.

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[1] Raj Kumar, *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010), 2.
[2] James Olney, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 21.
[3] Olney, *Autobiography*, 21.
[4] Olney, *Autobiography*, 22.
[5] Kumar, *Dalit Personal Narratives*, 3.

In the Indian context, we are met with a deeply divided Hindu society. Hindus are divided based on the caste system, also known as the varna system. As specified by Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar in *The Annihilation of Caste*, "The caste system does not demarcate racial division. The caste system is a social division of people of the same race."[6] According to the four-fold varna system, "*jatis* (caste) are many while *varnas* (rank) are only four. The latter are Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra."[7] However, Ambedkar, in his speech at Mahad Satyagraha had said, "The Hindus are divided according to sacred tradition, into four castes; but according to custom, into five: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras and Atishudras."[8] The Atishudra, erstwhile called Untouchables, is the most exploited community in India. They were given the name "harijan" which means "people of God" by Mahatama Gandhi which evoked pain, addressed as "depressed classes" by Ambedkar, which was a government-assigned identity and "scheduled caste" became a bureaucratic identity. There were other names given to the community such as Achut, Avarnas, Pariahs, Antyajas, some of which are ancient terms pointing towards their lowly status in the Hindu society. However, the community now chooses to define themselves as Dalit, a term coined in the late nineteenth century. Arun Prabha Mukherjee puts the term in historical context and writes that

> The term "Dalit" forcefully expresses their oppressed status. It comes from the Sanskrit root "dal" which means to crack open, split, crush, grind, and so forth… Jotirao Phule and B. R. Ambedkar, two towering figures in the pantheon of Dalit history, were the first to appropriate the word, as a noun and an adjective, in the early decades of the twentieth century to describe the extreme oppression of untouchables.[9]

In his introduction to an anthology of translated Marathi Dalit literature, Arjun Dangle defines Dalit, a Marathi word, as that which "traditionally connoted wretchedness, poverty and humiliation… 'Dalit' means masses exploited and oppressed economically, socially, culturally, in the name of religion and other factors."[10] Dangle elucidates, "Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society."[11] Alok Mukherjee's understanding of Dalits is in relation to the upper-caste Hindus. He writes, "Dalits are the upper caste Hindu's Other. But this Other is not only separate and different… This other is a part of Hindu society, and yet apart from it. Inscribed in that apartness and difference is inferiority."[12] These definitions of the term "Dalit" are all varied but similar in their understanding of Dalits as the most spurned and exploited social class in India.

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[6] B.R. Ambedkar, *The Annihilation of Caste* (Delhi: Navayana, 2014), 238.
[7] Satish Deshpande ed., *The Problem of Caste* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan), 26.
[8] B. R. Ambedkar, "Speech at Mahad," *The Poisoned Bread* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009), 257.
[9] Arun Prabha Mukherjee, "Introduction," *Joothan* (Delhi: Samya, 2010), xii.
[10] Arjun Dangle, "Introduction," *Poisoned Bread* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009), liii.
[11] Dangle, "Introduction," lii.
[12] Alok Mukherjee, "Reading Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*: From Erasure to Assertion," *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (Delhi, Orient Blackswan, 2004), 2.

Dalit literature is the literature that emerged from the Dalit community. Arun Prabha Mukherjee writes,

> The term "Dalit Literature" was first used in 1958, at the first ever Dalit literature conference held in Bombay. However, as an identity marker, the term "Dalit" came into prominence in 1972, when a group of young Marathi writers-activists founded an organization called Dalit Panthers… this was the first time they had been able to name themselves, as a collectivity, rather than be named by others… Dalit is a political identity, as opposed to a caste one.[13]

Dangle opines that "Dalit literature owes its origin to a revolutionary struggle for social and economic change."[14] He traces the roots of Dalit literature to Ambedkar and his struggle for upliftment of the community. Discussing the form and content of Dalit literature, Alok Mukherjee writes that it "is marked by a wholesome rejection of the tradition, the aesthetics, the language and the concerns of a Brahmanical literature that, even at its best, carried within it the signs of the caste-based social and cultural order."[15] His claim is based on his reading of Sharankumar Limbale, who writes, "Dalit writers reject the established tradition. This does not mean that they do not have a tradition. They claim the tradition of Buddha, Kabir, Phule and Ambedkar."[16] Limbale thus defines Dalit literature as literature of protest emerging out of the rebel tradition. This tradition has emerged out of the realization that there was an absence of an authentic "Dalit" experience of life in mainstream Indian literature, which propelled the Dalits to narrate their real-life experiences and to no longer remain silent on the margins of the society. They became the speaking subject with their participation in the literary space. Since then a lot of Dalit writers have written about their life experiences in the form of autobiographies.

The tradition of writing autobiographies is an ancient one in Western societies. Olney argues that one can trace the beginning of this genre: "The first autobiography was written by a gentleman named W. P. Scargill; it was published in 1834 and was called *The Autobiography of a Dissenting Minister*. Or perhaps… the first autobiography was written by St. Augustine at the turn of the fourth-fifth century A. D. (but he called it his *Confessions*)… and so on."[17] Thus, the genre comes across as well-established in the West. In the Indian context, however, the autobiographical tradition came into existence around the early seventeenth century. Kumar notes, "Banarasidas' *Ardhakathanaka* (1641) is considered to be the first Indian autobiography, written in Hindi verse in the early part of the seventeenth century."[18] However, this work marks the inception of only upper-caste Hindu male autobiographical narratives. Indian society is divided on the basis of caste,

[13] Arun Prabha Mukherjee, "Introduction," xii.
[14] Dangle "Introduction," xxii.
[15] Alok Mukherjee, "Reading Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*: From Erasure to Assertion," 10.
[16] Sharankumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2004), 26.
[17] Olney, *Autobiography*, 5.
[18] Kumar, *Dalit Personal Narratives*, 43.

which made it difficult for Dalits to understand and claim their selves and individuality at the time when upper-caste Hindu men could. Kanshi Ram notes that while "The High Caste Hindus were fighting for Swarajya (Self-rule or Independence), the Oppressed Indians were struggling for self-respect."[19] Dalit men's autobiographies, therefore, finally began appearing only in the twentieth century. However, the voices of Dalits gained currency and became prominent in the Indian public sphere in the 1990s, and that was the time when "Hindi Dalit writers first gained recognition for their work by publishing their autobiographies, and over time they have moved from a position of extreme marginalization to a central place within the mainstream Hindi literary field."[20] Since most of the Dalit writers started their writing careers by penning their autobiographies, this genre of life-writing becomes highly significant to Dalit literature.

This paper offers a study of two Dalit autobiographies, namely *Tiraskrit* (Despised or Disrespected) by Surajpal Chauhan and *Dohra Abhishaap* (Twice Cursed) by Kaushalya Baisantri. The paper analyzes these Dalit autobiographies as both these narratives have been written by authors who belong to the margins of the Dalit community. While Chauhan belongs to a Dalit sub-caste that is discriminated against even by the members of the Dalit community, Baisantri writes as a Dalit woman, occupying a marginal position within her patriarchal community. Further, these accounts are read not only as the narratives of pain and sufferings, but also as windows into the culture of these marginal communities. These narratives move from villages to cities, the modern, urban spaces. This move is crucial in helping the community that had been treated as untouchables to forge a new collective identity, and the process in turn leads to the formation of their own individual identity as well. The newness of this identity is also reflected in their narratives, as the protagonists of these tales are able to transcend their traditional caste occupations. This shift that has taken place in their lives is a marker of the changed social conditions in India. However, as described in their autobiographies, this change is still in progress as not every upper-caste Hindu has accepted Dalits as equal to them.

The title of Surajpal Chauhan's autobiography, *Tiraskrit*, amplifies the subject that is dealt with in the book. Translated into English, tiraskrit would mean something or someone that is not worthy of respect or not qualifying to be a human being. The narrative recounts the incidents in his life which made him feel disrespected by people because of the caste identity he bears. Chauhan belongs to the sweeper community, also known as Bhangi or Valmiki. Debjani Ganguly provides a brief history of the name "Valmiki" or "Balmiki" that was "given to the scavenger community by the Arya Samaj, an influential late nineteenth-century Hindu reform movement."[21] The name evokes "in the popular Hindu consciousness, Valmiki, [who is seen as] the Sanskrit composer of the epic *Ramayana*. In seeing themselves as descendants of such an illustrious ancestor, the scavengers recovered some of their dignity."[22] This name was given to the scavenger community

[19] Kanshi Ram, *The Chamcha Age: An Era of the Stooges* (Delhi, 1982), 7.
[20] Hunt, *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation*, 133.
[21] Ganguly, "Dalit Life Stories," *Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture*, 149.
[22] Ganguly, "Dalit Life Stories," 149.

because of the large-scale conversions from Hinduism to Islam and Christianity that were taking place in the 1920s. This way of calling the scavengers infused them with pride and also became a reason for them to stay within the folds of Hinduism. Chauhan writes in the preface that since he is addressing certain issues that only pertain to the people of the Valmiki caste, he is accused of spreading casteism within Dalit literature.[23] The book, thus, begins on a note of division, which throws light on the notion that Dalit literature is not a unified whole as it has been perceived. Rather, it comprises of writings by people who belong to different sub-castes, and thus, their accounts are also marked with stark differences from each other's accounts. Due to Chauhan's sub-caste, his can be understood to be an account about the marginalization of Valmiki community even within the Dalit community. Thus, this account can be seen as coming from the margins of the marginal Dalit community of India.

Chauhan writes about the cultural practices observed by the Valmiki community. But he chooses not to celebrate all the cultural traditions of his people. He also offers a critique of certain customs, like eating "joothan" or leftover food. The practice of eating "joothan" by the people of lower castes has been in existence for decades in Indian society. Chauhan and his family had been a victim of this oppressive and degrading custom during his childhood. He recounts an episode when he went along with his mother to collect the leftover food on the occasion of the wedding of a girl from an upper-caste family. Chauhan and his mother had to fight with the growling dogs to take the leftover food with them to their house.[24] Chauhan justifies the anger of the dogs because he was, in a way, taking away their share of food. This eschewal to romanticize his own community is crucial as it allows him to look at things around him from an objective point of view, allowing him to liberate himself from the grip of decrepit traditions. The concomitant of his critical engagement with the society is that he targets not just those who have oppressed and persecuted his people but he shifts the critical gaze on his own community. Thus, he attacks the degrading customs of Valmikis while celebrating his community's culture.

Reminiscing about his childhood events, Chauhan describes an incident when all the people of his family and village community were engaged in the task of catching a pig on the eve of the marriage of his uncle's daughter. There is a description of the killing and cutting of the pig's carcass, which Chauhan sees as an art.[25] This account illustrates that just as not everyone can be as learned as the Brahmins, not everyone deserves to be a Valmiki as well. The idea of merit exists even in the Valmiki community. One needs to have certain skills in order to be called a Bhangi or a Valmiki. The pig, in this narrative, is significant on many levels. In a Valmiki household, the presence of pigs signify prosperity. The larger the number of pigs, the more prosperous a family is considered to be. Mainstream Hindi literary space has always portrayed pigs as objects of filth, but Chauhan makes the pig function as a counter-symbol here. The pig functions as a symbol of a cultural tradition that is unique to the Valmiki community.

[23] Surajpal Chauhan, *Tiraskrit* (Delhi:Anubhav Prakashan, 2002), 7.
[24] Chauhan, *Tiraskrit*, 15
[25] Chauhan, *Tiraskrit*, 23-25.

The narrative of Chauhan illustrates how modern Indian society has failed to cope with the changes that have taken place in the social system since the country gained independence in 1947. It also helps in foregrounding the idea that caste very much remains a prominent factor in establishing a person's identity. Therefore, modernity's promise of liberation and erecting an egalitarian space, especially in urban spaces, remains a half-fulfilled dream. The Indian secular state has not yet rid itself of the ideologies of caste. Debjani Ganguly also writes about this:

> In case of Dalits, constitutional law in India does prohibit discrimination on caste grounds and has explicit provisions not just to promote low-caste mobility, but also to protect Dalit life and security. But as any number of studies show, atrocities against Dalits have continued to grow in proportion with India's accelerated growth under its liberalization policy and within a dramatically globalized economic order.[26]

Chauhan's narrative bears testimony to the harsh truth Ganguly exposes in her observation. The upshot of this fact is that one cannot hope to transcend the barriers of caste completely by concealing it even in the city space. However, Chauhan observes that there are some Dalits living in the city without revealing their caste identity. He also notes that everyone around these people is aware of their caste. Sarah Beth Hunt argues that this common urban experience of "attempting to hide one's Dalit identity and 'pass' as upper-caste, as well as the consequences of being discovered, throws an interesting light on the process of self-assertion."[27] However, this "self-assertion" may be questioned, primarily because of the fact that hiding their caste illustrates that Dalits do not have the audacity to proclaim their caste identity in an urban space, highlighting their tenuous and precarious sense of self. This also attests to the fact that Dalits think of themselves as inferior to their upper-caste counterparts.

There seems to exist a wide difference between the autobiographies written by Dalit men and those written by Dalit women, "in terms of emotions, nature of narrative and a sense of family and community."[28] Dalit men seem to focus on their public selves while their female counterparts write about their private and domestic struggles. Exploring the history of women's autobiography in India, Putul Sathe writes, "With reference to women's writing in India, women could write about only a few things in the absence of a sustained high level of formal education. Beginning in the 19th century it was the high- caste Hindu women, who began the tradition of writing autobiographies, which were located in the new emerging material and social condition resulting from reforms and legislative innovation in the public sphere."[29] *Amar Jiban* or My Life written by Rashsundari Devi in 1876 is the first autobiography by an Indian woman. It is notable that it took

[26] Debjani Ganguly, "Dalit Life Stories," *Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 147.
[27] Hunt, *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation*, 180.
[28] Shweta Singh, "Representation of Dalit Women in Dalit Men's and Women's Autobiographies," The *Delhi University Journal of the Humanities and the Social Sciences* Vol. 1 (2014): 43.
[29] Putul Sathe, "Ethnography of True Marginalised Self: Reading of Dalit Women's Autobiographies," *Women's Link* 19, no. 4 (2013): 26.

more than two centuries for an Indian woman to write about her life after the first autobiography by an Indian man was published in 1641. The first Dalit autobiography, however, surfaces after another century in 1978, written by Daya Pawar, titled *Baluta*, a Marathi word which refers to the share received by Mahars, a Dalit community, in return for doing certain menial activities which was considered their duty. It took a few more years for a Dalit woman to narrate the story of her life and the first autobiography written by a Dalit woman was published in 1981 by Kumud Pawade, titled *Antasphot*, or Outburst. It is pertinent that the appearance of the first Dalit autobiography, both by male and female writers, happens in Maharashtra, a state in India which is influenced by the ideology of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar the most.

For upper-caste Indian women, the struggle to write autobiographies was a struggle against tradition, in which they tried to universalize the problem of all Indian women. Their fight was, thus, unmarked by caste. This led educated Dalit women to begin writing about their own lives. Most of these female authors made their debut attempt at penning their autobiographies in regional languages. This is what Kumar sees as the reason "why, perhaps, Dalit women autobiographers are still faceless and nameless in the so-called mainstream literary circles and more so in the field of English literary criticism."[30] A notable aspect of Dalit women's self-narratives is that they engage with the issue of the absence of a female Dalit voice within the Indian feminist movement. "Articulation of gendered marginality with the emergence of autonomous Dalit women's organization drew attention to the complex relationship between feminism and a caste's complex history."[31] Thus, "the critique of Dalit movement coupled with the critique of invisibility of caste within the Indian feminist movement argues for the need of Dalit women to speak 'differently' and brings to the forefront new discourses on caste and gender."[32] Writing about their self by Dalit women becomes important primarily as one finds in their accounts an attempt to incorporate "hitherto unspoken female experience in telling their own stories." In doing so, these female writers revised the content and purposes of autobiography and insisted on alternative stories.[33] Dalit autobiographies may have become a well-known genre of literature, but Dalit women's autobiographies still stand in the dark. Not many Dalit women have written about their lives in the form of autobiographies. Since this genre is considered masculine and middle-class, the presence of women is neither expected nor missed, much less the presence of Dalit women. The collective field of Dalit literature appears to have a "decidedly masculine identity. Dalit women are, in fact, almost entirely absent from these texts."[34] This silence on the part of Dalit men to question gender bias in literature, forced Dalit women to voice their stories in their own words.

[30] Kumar, *Dalit Personal Narratives*, 210.
[31] Sathe, "Ethnography of True Marginalised Self," 27.
[32] Sathe, "Ethnography of True Marginalised Self," 30.
[33] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (USA: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 5.
[34] Hunt, *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation*, 196.

Dalit feminists have been questioning the lower social and political roles assigned to them by Dalit men. The condition of women in Dalit society and their oppression is subject to their caste and gender roles. They are seen as Dalit even within the Dalits. Bajrang Bihari Tiwari opines that, "Generally Dalit writers do not consider Dalit feminism as a separate category. They include it in Dalit writing and they have enough arguments in support of that."[35] Dr. Ambedkar, however, worked for the upliftment of women, and "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."[36] This led to the rise of Marathi Dalit women writers who tried to explore the legacies of exploitation based on caste and gender.[37] Dalit women "rightly started questioning why they were not considered for the top position in Dalit literary conferences and institutions."[38]

Kausalya Baisantri's *Dohra Abhishaap*, roughly translated to English as 'twice cursed', is lauded as the first autobiography written in Hindi by a Dalit woman. It was published in 1999. The title justifies the content of the narrative. Being born a Dalit is a curse in the Indian society but being born as a woman in a Dalit house is like being cursed twice. A Dalit woman operates under two kinds of patriarchal setups. The first is Brahmin patriarchy, and the second is Dalit patriarchy. The narrative is set in *Mahar*ashtra, "the home of the Dalit movement led by Ambedkar, who also came from this community."[39] The narrative focusses on the progress that the *Mahar* community of Maharashtra has made in years following the independence of India. At the time when Baisantri wrote this narrative, many Hindu temples had given way to Buddha vihars.[40] This indicates the degree of influence of Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism. The influence of Ambedkar's ideology is also important in this context because Maharashtra was the place from where he started his movement against untouchability.

The prominence of Ambedkar's ideology is notable in Baisantri's narrative because Ambedkar wanted Dalits to focus on education, especially for women. Education was required to gain a respectable place in society and Dalit women from Maharashtra seem to have understood its importance because most of them are well educated and well informed about their rights. In the narrative, the school started by Jaai Baai, a Dalit woman, exemplifies the awareness among women about the importance of education.[41] The narrator's family also seems to be governed by her mother, and it is the mother who seems firm on her decision to educate her children. The role of Baisantri's father in her education seems limited.[42] These instances point towards the greater level

[35] Bajrang Bihari Tiwari, "Concepts of Dalit Feminism," *Journal of Literature and Aesthetics* 8, no. 1 (2008): 71.
[36] Kumar, *Dalit Personal Narratives*, 214.
[37] Smith and Watson, ed. *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 6.
[38] Guru, "Dalit Women Talk Differently," 83.
[39] Ganguly, "Dalit Life Stories," 154.
[40] Kausalya Baisantri, *Dohra Abhishaap* (Delhi: Parmeshwari Prakashan), 35.
[41] Baisantri, *Dohra Abhishaap*, 39.
[42] Baisantri, *Dohra Abhishaap*, 47.

of influence of Ambedkar's teachings among Dalit women as compared to their male counterparts. Thus, Baisantri makes her mother and Jaai Baai appear to be well informed women. Baisantri herself was a politically active student during her school and college days and because of this reason she was seen as a sexually promiscuous woman in her neighborhood. She would talk to boys and invite them to her house for discussions regarding pertinent political and social issues. Even though these meetings were for the upliftment of the untouchable students' union, stigma was attached to an unmarried woman meeting men in private.[43] Later in the narrative, issues of obliterating Dalit women from the Dalit movement is also taken up by Baisantri. Gopal Guru takes up the issue of marginalization of Dalit women and writes "Dalit male writers do not take serious note of the literary output of Dalit women and tend to be dismissive of it. Dalit women rightly question why they are not considered for the top position in Dalit literary conferences and institutions."[44]

The difference between what Chauhan writes about discrimination within Dalits in his autobiography and the instances of discrimination that Baisantri gives in her narrative is stark. While Chauhan faced caste based discrimination, Baisantri had to face gender based discrimination along with being discriminated for her caste identity. In the preface to *Poisoned Bread*, Gail Omvedt writes, "The era of literature, lasting from the end of the 1960s to about the middle 1980s, might be called the 'golden age' of modern Marathi Dalit Literature."[45] What she overlooks is the reality that during this "golden age" of modern Marathi literature, not many Dalit women writers were present on the scene. While Dalit men have ignored the question of the liberation of Dalit women, Indian feminists have also "universalized the experiences of women without considering differences based on class and caste."[46] Feminists believe that all women go through similar experiences and thus deal with a few common issues. But the issue of caste is peculiar only to Dalit women. This led to the alienation of Dalit women from the feminist movement that started in India during the 1970s. This in turn helped Dalit women to come together and protest against the double oppression of caste and gender that they face in the Indian society. This led to the rise of Dalit feminism in India.

In his essay, "Dalit Women Talk differently" Guru writes, "In the post-Ambedkar period, Dalit leaders have always subordinated, and at times suppressed an independent political expression of Dalit women."[47] However, Guru is also concerned about the participation of Dalit women who come from places that are not as much affected by Ambedkar as *Mahar*ashtra is. He expresses his concern regarding this and says, "There is a notable shift taking place in the location of Dalit women. Dalit women from *Mahar*ashtra are better educated and employed than their

[43] Baisantri, *Dohra Abhishaap*, 75.
[44] Gopal Guru, "Dalit Women Talk Differently," *Gender and Caste: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism* (Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2003), 83.
[45] Gail Omvedt, "Preface," *Poisoned Bread* (India: Orient Blackswan, 2009), xiii.
[46] Singh, "Representation of Dalit Women in Dalit Men's and Women's Autobiographies," 40.
[47] Guru, "Dalit Women Talk Differently," 83.

counterparts from Karnataka… Thus, here too, a certain section of Dalit women will be rendered anonymous."[48]

In Baisantri's narrative, the real face of Dalit men who speak about women's liberation and freedom in public gets revealed in the private space. Baisantri's husband was an honored freedom fighter who received a pension for his service, but he never gave any freedom to his wife. He did not even give her enough money to fend for her own needs. He kept her as a servant.[49] In this and other narratives by Dalit women, Dalit men come across as the source of the worst form of exploitation, and "the body of the violated Dalit woman provides a critique of Dalit patriarchy and destroys the myth of Dalit patriarchy as democratic." Thus, Dalit women do not have to deal with multiple patriarchies, but with a graded patriarchal setup.[50] Baisantri notes in her narrative her struggles to be a part of the Dalit public sphere. But she could be a part of this discursive sphere only until she was supported by her father. Once she got married, she was forced not to participate in the public sphere by her husband.[51] Such instances throw light on Dalit patriarchy and their regressive attitude towards Dalit women. When reading *Dohra Abhishaap* as a narrative of growth of the narrator, the evolved self is marked by the courage to confront the cruelties of the social order.

Toral Jatin Gajarawala notes the trajectory of Dalit autobiographical narratives and writes that, "this is a classic tale of modern Dalit literature, a paradigm of Dalit realism: grounded in the experience of casteism faced by a singular protagonist, seemingly artless in terms of narrative style, demonstrating a united platform for social change, and displaying Dalit chetna (consciousness)."[52] In autobiographical narratives, the protagonist is seen as a naïve character who experiences caste-based discrimination as a result of his credulous actions. Thus, the journey into the protagonist's adulthood is marked as "a growing political consciousness of their 'Dalit' identity beyond the individual's local *jati* associations, through increasing awareness of Ambedkar's ideology."[53]

Autobiographies, thus, consist of elements of life writing and self-building. Also, based on the study of the two Dalit autobiographies, it can be concluded that autobiography is a crucial genre for marginal communities because it is the marginal self that needs to be constructed as it has been denied such opportunities in the past. It is possible for many authors to achieve this through the process of exploring the self that occurs while writing an autobiography. Through this process, the marginal self takes the central position and voices the struggle against oppression, as

[48] Guru, "Dalit Women Talk Differently," 84.
[49] Baisantri, *Dohra Abhishaap*, 106.
[50] Putul Sathe, "Ethnography of True Marginalised Self: Reading of Dalit Women's Autobiographies," 28.
[51] Baisantri, *Dohra Abhishaap*, 104.
[52] Toral Jatin Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 87.
[53] Hunt, *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation*, 137.

has been done by the narrators of *Tiraskrit* and *Dohra Abhishaap*. As discussed in the paper, these voices are doubly marginalized and in the process of constructing the self, which happens in relation to the society with which they are in conflict, they are also able to recognize the limitations of society, along with the fissures that exist in the Dalit community. The voice that rises from the margins, then, becomes a voice that questions the center that created the margin. The self that began as naïve is now socially and politically informed.

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