

Signifying Pain, Signifying Self: Reading Autobiographical Narratives by Dalit Women

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Abstract

The paper attempts to study the psychological dimension of representation of pain in the autobiographical narratives by Dalit women, namely, *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) by Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008) and Bama's *Sangati* (2005); to explicate the modalities through which "writing about personal experience translates the physical world into the world of language where there is interplay between disorder and order, wounding and repair."¹ The focus is to articulate, how the symbolization and transmutation of the experience of stigma, trauma and pain allows the writer to gain control over the event and as an extension refute the role of victim to acquire agency by assuming authorial voice and how writing becomes an enabling medium for Dalit women for constructing and refashioning the self within phallogocentric discourse of Dalit patriarchy. The paper will also enunciate how writing mirrors the process of erasure or abjection yet also enables scope for corrective intervention by exposing the ideological mechanisms at work that make Dalit women complicit in self effacement and their own subjugation.

Keywords: Pain, Writing, Dalit, Autobiography, Representation

Sharan Kumar Limbale in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, describes Dalit literature as "a lofty image of grief," the kind that portrays, sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty.² In order to forge a positive self image and remedy ages of cultural erasure, Dalit writers have employed the cathartic power of writing as a means to integrate traumatic experiences for transmuting suffering into a meaningful life story. A commonality in these autobiographical narratives is that the 'I' does not have an autonomous existence outside the collective 'we'. With the focalization jumping between the individual and the community, the texts invoke multiple subjectivities enabling a politics of collectivity, rendering the experience of psychic pain as general, thus becoming a mode of invoking larger solidarities. Hence, pain in Dalit autobiographical narratives becomes a bridge of shared human experience, giving collective relevance to individual memories. The autobiographies by male authors like Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi*, Kishore Gaikwad's *Uchalya* and Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* did challenge the 'discourse of pity' by upper caste writers, by transforming the recollection of the 'ontological wounding' of the self marked by constant humiliation into representation of Dalit subalternity as a political act of resistance.³ Yet within these narratives, Dalit women remain firmly encapsulated in the role of 'mother' or the 'victimized sexual being,' as pointed

¹ Harris, Judith. *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self through Writing* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 2.

² Limbale, Sharan Kumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*. Translated by Alok Mukherjee (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010), 13.

³ Sathé, Patul. "Ethnography of the Marginalized Self: Reading of Dalit Women's Autobiographies." *Women's Link* 19, no.4 (November 2013): 25-32.

out by Sharmila Rege.⁴ As a consequence, the dimension of the sexual politics based on caste and gender interface, and control of female sexuality which roots women as the 'gateways of caste system,' remains much obfuscated in critical interrogations of caste.⁵ What also remains obliterated in the realm of representation is the cultural violence reserved for Dalit women comprising of verbal abuse, naked parading, dismemberment, branding, force feeding of urine and feces, and such other horrid instances of humiliation and mortification, used as weapons of reprisal.

This paper attempts to study the psychological dimension of representation of pain in the autobiographical narratives by Dalit women, namely, *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) by Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008) and Bama's *Sangati* (2005); to explicate the modalities through which "writing about personal experience translates the physical world into the world of language where there is interplay between disorder and order, wounding and repair."⁶ The focus is to articulate, how the symbolization and transmutation of the experience of stigma, trauma and pain allows the writer to gain control over the event; and as an extension refute the role of the victim to acquire agency by assuming authorial voice. This paper tries to understand how writing becomes an enabling medium for Dalit women for constructing and refashioning the self within the phallogocentric discourse of Dalit patriarchy. It will also enunciate how writing mirrors the process of erasure or abjection yet also enables scope for corrective intervention by exposing the ideological mechanisms at work that make Dalit women complicit in their own subjugation.

Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha* (1986) in Marathi, translated into English by Maya Pandit, titled *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) is considered a milestone, as it is probably the first autobiography by a Dalit woman.⁷ Regarded as a socio-biography, it depicts the exploitative conditions that Mahar women endure, which include hunger, poverty and domestic violence. Though the text makes important intervention in Dalit discourse, presenting a sociological critique of Dalit patriarchy, the author herself is hardly present in the narrative, which can be read as a self-inflicted erasure of the 'self'. When asked about voicing her personal experience of suffering, and the need to discuss it with others, Kamble reveals:

"In my personal life, I had to suffer like many other woman. But how do you go and talk about it when everyone is suffering? [...] In those days, men always wanted to control women. It was quite common for a husband to beat his wife because he doubted her faithfulness. And I wasn't an exception.... I never discussed my suffering with anybody. I bore it all alone. Sometimes, I used to feel desperate; I used to feel like giving up everything. I had an old uncle. He was blind in one eye. He used to tell us stories of *pativrata* women from mythology. Maybe those stories influenced me a lot. I think that they gave me strength to go through all this.... Anyway, for me, the suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified completely with my people. And therefore *Jina Amucha* was the autobiography of my entire community".⁸

⁴ Rege, Sharmila. "Afterword." In *The Weave of My Life* (Kolkata: Stree, 2008), 323-345.

⁵ Ambedkar, B.R., "Rise and fall of Hindu Women", *The Journal of Mahabodhi Society* (Calcutta: Sugat Prakashan, 1950), 6-48

⁶ Harris, Judith. *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self through Writing*, 2.

⁷ Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. Translated by Maya Pandit (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2008).

⁸ Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. 154-157.

The excerpt from the text illustrates the asymmetrical power dynamic between genders, within the Dalit community. It also reflects how Dalit patriarchy is undergirded by Brahmanical sexual discourse that ascribes values on women's body, appropriating them as deprived or respectable on moral terms, evident in the notions of 'modesty', 'honour' and 'wifely fidelity'. Kamble in *The Prisons We Broke* provides a poignant depiction of how caste and gender ideologies discursively construct the position of Dalit women as a subject that constantly undergoes abjection, through its portrayal of the figure of the daughter-in-law as a passive victim, caught in rigid systems of kinship and hierarchy. The torturous life experience of a young Dalit girl, still a child when married off, even before puberty sets in, entails a constant erosion of her individuality. Rather than the upper caste men or Dalit men, the chief agent of patriarchal oppression for them is the mother-in-law. From the time the child bride arrives at her in-laws' house, she is expected to serve the family and is treated as a household slave. Kamble in portraying the daily life of a Dalit woman shows how they are not even allowed to sleep properly – the mother-in-law would wake up the daughter-in-law in the wee hours of morning, dragging her up by her hair, asking her at times to make two basket full of *bhakris* which would invariably be burnt due to the girl's inexperience, and then held up to ridicule by the mother-in-law in front of the neighbors and friends. Apart from walking long distances for fetching water from the river every day, the girl would have to perform several laborious tasks such as grinding *jowar* on the grinding stone that would make her hands blister. After her first menstrual period the misery of these girls would only increase many folds. The *sasu* would keep a close watch on her and would not let her son to even glance at his wife, for the fear of their coming together, lest her son would be snatched away from her. To ensure this she would even stay awake at night just to keep vigil. The *sasu* would constantly complain about the girl to her son and even go to the extent of concocting false stories to incite her son against her, and provoke him to thrash his wife. For instance, Kamble narrates that, when her daughter-in-law finished grinding the *jowar*, the *sasu* would send her to fetch water, then she would grind some glass bangles and mix the glass powder with the flour while making *bhakris*. Later when the girl returned, the *sasu* would eat the *bhakri*, spit it out and falsely accuse the daughter-in-law of mixing glass in the flour as ploy to kill her, staging much brouhaha complaining about it. She would then run from house to house in the neighborhood to publicly disgrace the girl. Such scandals and conspiracies would be commonplace in Mahar neighborhood. The whole village would then unite in abusing the girl and brand her a 'witch'. Further, to make things worse a woman would claim to be possessed and call the girl an 'evil presence' who is never to be trusted. She would also go on to enact a fit of madness making pronouncements:

"But you too forgot your god. Give your son's firstborn to Madmalu. This pronouncement chilled the hearts of the women and made them tremble with fear. They would hastily apply kumkum and haldi on the possessed woman's forehead and fall at her feet. Amidst this chaos, the poor daughter-in-law would tremble like a leaf. Petrified and unable to utter a single word, she would watch the people around with a sinking heart. The furious husband would beat her to pulp with a stick and drive her out of the house. She was an easy prey. Anybody could torture as they wished".⁹

The lines insinuate psychological repression and regulation of desire through discipline and punishment in making of Foucauldian 'docile bodies.' "[T]he body as object and target of

⁹ Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. 97.

power...the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys and responds....A body that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved".¹⁰ Foucault's idea of the body as the site of oppression depicts how girls are subdued and taught to be feeble and passive, and coerced to imbibe gender roles through conditioning. Kamble provides an explicit depiction of how women themselves reiterate patriarchal gender ideology which is detrimental to the formulation of positive self image. She also represents how the erasure of female subjectivity within Dalit community is just not figurative but also literal, effectuated through disfigurement of women. She writes:

In those days, at least one woman in hundred would have her nose chopped of...because of the *sasu*, who would poison her son's mind. Every day the *maharwada* would resound with the cries of hapless women in some house or the other. Husbands, flogging their wives as if they were beasts, would do so until the sticks broke with the effort. The heads of these women would break open, their backbones would be crushed and some would collapse unconscious.... Many daughters-in-law would try to run away to escape this torture.... When everybody was fast asleep, the harassed daughter-in-law would pick up a couple of rags and run away under the cover of darkness.... Immediately on her heels would follow her brother-in-law or *sasra* or her husband! Nobody, neither her in-laws nor any of the others, had any sympathy for the poor tortured girl.... Even her brother and father would flog her mercilessly and ask the in-laws to take her back. The poor girl, numb with pain and hunger, was forced to return to her husband's home.... Once she was brought back to her in-laws' house, an even worse fate awaited her. Her in-laws would take a huge square piece of wood – weighing around five kilos – to the carpenter to have stocks made for her. The carpenter would drill a hole in the wood, big enough for her foot to go through. After this, they would put an iron bar through the sides so as to make it impossible for her to pull her foot out. The wood itself would be as huge and heavy as a large iron tub. She would have to drag this heavy burden each time she tried to move. She was forced to work with this device around her leg. Her leg would get wounded and blood would ooze out every time she tried to move her leg.... The *sasu* would whisper into his son's ears, 'Dhondya, what good is such a runaway wife to you? Some bastard must have made her leave you. She must be having an affair. Don't let off so easily. Dhondya, cut off the tip of her nose: only then my mother's heart breathe easy! Don't bring shame to your father's name. And don't you worry, I'll get you as many wives as you want.... This speech was followed by a drama of shedding false tears and...after a suitable pause she would continue, "God! We did not even dare to speak to the dog and hen in our in-laws' house disrespectfully.... We did not get food to eat for four days at a stretch.... We had to suffer so much! Oh, how we suffered! Just like Sita suffered during her exile".¹¹

In the book, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*, Uma Chakravarty elucidates that in caste hierarchy, the mechanism of control upon women operates on three levels.¹² To enumerate; the first at the realm of ideology, secondly at the level of kinship whereby, the right to discipline an errant woman rests with the kinsmen and thirdly at the domain of law of the state that empowers the king or state to punish the women for recalcitrant behavior. At the ideological level the women are made to internalize the *stridharma* or *prativratadharma* through stereotypes

¹⁰ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 136.

¹¹ Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. 98-101.

¹² Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (Calcutta: Stree, 2003)

like that of *Sita* and *Savitri*, making them believe that they gain power and respect by following these naturalized patriarchal codes, thereby making them complicit in their own subjugation. Kamble's identification with Sita's agony and 'suffering in silence' reveal an ambiguous yet symbiotic relationship between the hegemonic and the subaltern within the psyche of the subject, who tries to negotiate with the subconscious conditioning of primary socialization that prevents accompanying change in behaviour from within the category, due to interpellated Brahmanical norms. In my observation, the texts under study present a critique of caste, rooting it in control of female sexuality (through the institution of marriage). It poses a substantive challenge to the perspective based on ritual status within the 'purity/ pollution' religio-cultural framework that dominates knowledge production in social sciences, and theorizations about the ontological and epistemological nature of Dalit lived experience. 'Sexuality' here implies not merely physical desire but politics in itself. As Proposed by Jennifer P. Ting, it is constructed through socio-political relations and is determined by them too. As an analytic category, it reveals the operation of micro-politics of power that privileges some and penalizes some.¹³ Thus, based on Foucault's analysis of the objectification and subjectification of human subjects, if subjectivity is seen as a point of intersection, a space in which an individual's libidinal energy is worked upon by disciplinary discourses; a critique of patriarchal sexual moors can be read in Urmila Pawar's narration of her first night experience in the following lines:

"My husband's hands were groping all over my body.... I was completely thrown out of gear! What was I doing? I could sense nothing except my husband's terrible disappointment. 'So frigid!' He said in the morning. That was the certificate I had earned from my husband after our first night! Yet he smiled to himself. May be he did expect me to be 'frigid' on the first night! A sign of me being a virgin! Had I taken any initiative, he would have suspected my virginity! I was not at all frigid! I understood every move very well. However, these were being done to me against my wishes."¹⁴

The retrospective recollection of the event by the author enables a revision of power dynamics where the object reveals agency yet uses it only to fit into the mould of the 'chaste wife'. The line "I understood every move" reveals strategically used, willing submissiveness to avert mortification, yet registers a note of protest in the acknowledgement, "these were done to me against my wishes". The lines document a moment of split motivation. It is Pawar's *Aaydan* (2003) translated from Marathi into English by Maya Pandit and published as *The Weave of My Life*, that marks a significant departure from the orientation adopted by other Dalit autobiographies, by presenting "a complex narrative of a gendered individual who looks at the world initially from her location within the caste but who also goes on to transcend the caste identity from a feminist perspective".¹⁵ *Aaydan* is a generic term used for all things made from bamboo; the other meanings being 'utensil' and 'weapon'. The word being the central metaphor for the memoir, establishes a connection between writing and weaving, by stressing that both are a product of 'thought' in the following words: "My mother used to weave *aaydans*. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering and agony that links us."¹⁶ To me it is also indicative of the constructed and mediated nature of the narrative that undermines the dominant notion of a unified essentialized

¹³ Ting, P. Jennifer. "The Power of Sexuality." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 1. no 1 (1998): 65-82.

¹⁴ Pawar, Urmila. *The Weave of My Life*. Translated by Maya Pandit (Kolkata: Stree, 2008), 183-184.

¹⁵ Pandit, Maya. "Introduction." In *The Weave of My Life* (Kolkata: Stree, 2008), xv-xxxiii.

¹⁶ Pawar, Urmila. *The Weave of My Life*, x.

self by highlighting that the author is imbricated within the larger discourse. It highlights the “complex relations between social processes through which personal memory becomes collectivized and collective memory comes to be articulated by individual recollections.”¹⁷ Pawar’s text with its sexually charged language is also remarkable for highlighting the role of language as a medium that both gives a voice and takes it away. It reveals how the subject is constructed *by* as well as dissolved/diffuses *into* words. The choice of words itself then becomes a political stance. For instance, in her narrative she points out that while reading the book *Before and After Childbirth* she realized that the writer abstained from using sexual terms for female body parts: “Once the umbilical cord is cut, the baby which has come out becomes free (out of what?). ‘Sometimes the baby gets in a horizontal position inside (where exactly inside?) Sometimes one arm or leg comes out’ (out of what?)”¹⁸ The lines are indicative of the obliteration of female body in the realm of representation, so much so that the figure of woman features only in a disembodied form or in absence, for the purpose of upholding the norms of modesty as the mention of female body parts invokes connotations of shame.

In the same vein, *Sangati (Events)* originally written in Tamil (1994), translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom into English, foregrounds the multi-layered subjugation faced by Dalit women, revealing how gender accentuates caste oppression, rendering them more vulnerable to violence, exploitation and mortification as compared to men, through the characters of *Raakkamma*, *Maikkanni*, *Muukkkama*, *Irulaayi*, *Pecchiamma* and others.¹⁹ The colloquial and dialogic multiple narration with extensive use of Dalit Tamil slangs and sexually explicit references, presents retrospective meditations by Paraiya women, interspersed with generalized comments along with folklore, proverbs, legends and songs woven into the text. Devoid of a definitive plot, *Sangati* (which means ‘events’) is divided into twelve chapters. It is an assortment of interconnected anecdotes, experiences and memories by women of Paraiya community, accommodating more than thirty-five characters from three generations, recounting instances of hurt and humiliation, describing all aspects of their everyday life from birth till death. Thus, it not only voices the specific grievances of these women but also suggestively unveils the psychological stresses, accompanying a toilsome life, that make these women susceptible to superstitious beliefs in their being possessed by spirits or *peys*.

To conclude, it can be proposed that pain is not limited to a significant event or two only, but, as we see in the texts under study, has a pervasive presence. It emanates from the humiliating social conditions and cultural violence comprising lynching, whipping and canning that Dalit women endure on everyday basis throughout their life. The act of recollection in writing the autobiographical narrative provides the necessary aesthetic distance from the emotional distress to articulate, as Judith Harris postulates, “a stable identity and regaining ego strength lost in crisis or infirmity”.²⁰ The confessional mode also acts as a cathartic form in throwing off the burden of guilt or shame associated with the traumatic memories, and at the same time fosters responsiveness in the reader removed from the writer’s plight. The text demands of him that he takes the responsibility of bearing witness, thus embodying potential for affirmative action. The commonality perceivable in the texts is that instead of evoking self pity, pain here is channeled into writing to transmute erasure (female body that goes through continuous

¹⁷ Rege, Sharmila. “Afterword.” In *The Weave of My Life*, 323–345.

¹⁸ Pawar, Urmila. *The Weave of My Life*, 211.

¹⁹ Bama. *Sangati*. Translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁰ Harris, Judith. 2003. *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self through Writing*, xv.

abjection, physically, psychologically and emotionally) into signification thereby accomplishing the psychoanalytical goal of making the unconscious conscious through language’s referential power to represent and dramatize the self. Signification thus, is not just the manipulation of language into poetic or discursive form rather it is an arduous and agonizing process of speaking the unspeakable. It is the process of self disclosure, self acceptance and refashioning the self, thereby re-casting the Dalit identity into a gendered mode, to reveal what Uma Chakravarty calls “graded patriarchies” operating within the grid of Brahmanical patriarchy.²¹ In other words, Dalit patriarchy rather than being democratic, as professed by certain Dalit ideologues, is undergirded by Brahmanical sexual discourse that regulates the sexual division of labour as well as the division of sexual labour. These narratives thus, usher into Dalit literature and discourse ‘the Dalit feminist standpoint’ furnishing an epistemic privilege to provide “more encompassing view of the social reality” by bringing hitherto silenced and marginalized constituency of Dalit women to the centre.²²

²¹ Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*.

²² Guru, Gopal. “Dalit Women Talk Differently.” *Gender and Caste*. Edited by Anupama Rao (New Delhi: Zed Books, 2003), 40–54.