International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences
Vol-10, Issue-4; Jul-Aug, 2025

Peer-Reviewed Journal
Journal Home Page Available: https://ijels.com/
Journal DOI: 10.22161/ijels

The Dalit Identity: Interrogating Dalit Literature and the need for Dalit Women's Autobiography

Oly Saha

Assistant Professor, Department of English, MUC Women's College, The University of Burdwan, Burdwan, West Bengal, India

Received: 21 Jun 2025; Received in revised form: 12 Jul 2025; Accepted: 16 Jul 2025; Available online: 20 Jul 2025

Abstract— *The need for a Dalit feminist position is deeply rooted in the structural and generational experience of discrimination that Dalit women face—both within and outside the broader Dalit movement and Indian feminism. As Bama Faustina Susairaj highlights, the Dalit identity carries a stigma that persists regardless of social mobility, education, or professional success. Dalit women, in particular, experience layers of oppression: they are marginalized not only within the broader caste hierarchy but also within their own communities and religious institutions, as seen in Bama's experiences inside the Christian convent. This reinforces the argument that Dalitness is not just a category—it is an ongoing, deeply embedded institution shaped by multiple factors like geography, language, socioeconomic status, religion, and gender. Mainstream Indian feminism, often dominated by upper-caste voices, has historically failed to address the unique struggles of Dalit women, assuming a universal experience of womanhood that ignores caste-based oppression. Similarly, Dalit politics, while focused on caste liberation, has not always prioritized gender-specific issues within Dalit communities. This makes a separate Dalit feminist position crucial: it acknowledges that Dalit women's voices, lived realities, and activism must be recognized independently to challenge both caste and gender oppression. A Dalit feminist perspective ensures that the intricate and intersectional nature of discrimination is addressed, rather than being overshadowed by broader feminist or Dalit movements. It is a necessary stand against caste patriarchy, making space for empowerment and visibility in a system where Dalit women are often erased or sidelined. With this perspective in mind this paper assays the need for a Dalit Feminist Position and in respect to it the place that Dalit feminist literature in general and Dalit women's autobiographies in particular hold in that arena.*

Keywords— ***Dalit feminist standpoint, Dalit feminism, Dalit Women's Autobiographies.***

I. INTRODUCTION

In an interview to Manjari Singh, the Dalit writer Bama Faustina Susairaj says, "In my dalitness there is no social status and we are always tossed aside as impure and not up to [their] expectations. So even if I study and work and become like anyone else, that stigma is there. Untouchability, caste system, discrimination and violence are very crucial."[1] In her autobiography *Karukku* (2000)[2] Bama illustrates how this 'dalitness' exists even in a non-Brahmanical religious society when she talks about her experiences inside the Christian Convent. Indeed, the Dalit identity is not just any categorical naming, but a structural experience that permeates through generations making it into a formidable mammoth, an immeasurable institution that is full of malleable dimensions. The nuances of the caste configurations are not something that anyone can explain in simple, easy words because the system of the castes is an intricate nexus affected by geographical, temporal, linguistic, socioeconomic, religious, cultural, and gendered factors.

1.1 The need for a Dalit Feminist Position amidst Dalit Politics and mainstream Indian Feminism

It must be acknowledged that the Dalit feminist movement recognizes that the experiences of Dalit women are unique and that their perspective and strive are not entirely honoured or addressed within the broader Dalit movement

or within the mainstream Indian women's movement. The historian Uma Chakravarti talks about the incident of the Mandal agitation as a watershed moment in the larger struggle in the history of Indian women's rights activism and as initiating the Dalit feminist consciousness. Established in 1979, the Mandal Commission deliberated a 27 percent reservation for other backward classes (OBCs) in government jobs and educational institutions. The implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission faced widespread protests, which also sometimes turned violent, from upper caste sections of the society. The protesters argued that an increased reservation of the OBCs would only lead to the death of merit thus denying opportunities to the candidates who were 'deserving.' Uma Chakravarti in her book *Gendering Caste* (2003)[3] mentions the relevance of a particular protest placard held by upper-caste women college students that read, "We don't want unemployed husbands". This particular writing encapsulates the understanding behind Dalit Feminism as it delineates two significant discourses: One that the opposition to reservation was not based on merit but caste privileges and that upper caste people were unwilling to share power and opportunities with the historically deprived castes; Two that the upper-caste women students were not protesting for themselves as future employed candidates in government jobs, but for their future husbands who will only be from upper-caste backgrounds thus re-establishing patriarchal systems that recognizes women as homemakers instead of employable people. In addition to this the protesters also reappropriated the rules of the caste structures that essentially refuse a level playing field for the historically marginalized castes thus resulting in the recurrence of the same social injustice that was set out to be corrected. Additionally, the anti-Mandal agitations brought to the front the subject of sexual violence and different forms of physical and emotional abuse against Dalit women. Uma Chakravarti through her take on the Anti Mandal agitation explores how the caste system works hand in hand with patriarchal system to ensure the preservation of systemic and hierarchal humiliation and discrimination in the Indian social scenario. Journalist TK Rajalakshmi in her review of *Gendering Caste* says that Chakravarti, "questions how the Indian Caste system views women and how women see the social stratification in contemporary India."[4] Doubtlessly the gaze of the two systemic entities on each other succinctly summarizes the place and position of Dalit Women's rights amidst Indian Women's Rights.

In the Introduction to the book *Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader* (2020),[5] the editors Sunaina Arora and Akash Singh Rathore says,

Indian feminists have a widespread inclination towards taking the feminist thesis as their premise and abandoning women's relation to caste. The neglect of Dalit in the Indian discourse on gender is deeply problematic because Dalit women occupy subordinate positions in most organised production of feminist knowledge. In the beginning of the twenty first century, feminists have increasingly begun to recognise this oversight, and several books have emerged highlighting Dalit women's contribution to Indian feminism. But mainstream Indian feminists have by-passed this rectifying body of knowledge, despite its importance and relevance. Indian feminist discourse which ought to bring gender-justice to all Indian women, at least in theory, has suppressed the caste question to such an extent that feminism itself has been seen as a modality of subjugating women from Dalit communities.[6]

BR Ambedkar's stated that "women were the gateways to the caste system" as a result of caste endogamy that ensures the 'purity' or watertightness of the different castes. In the research paper named "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development" (1916-17)[7] Ambedkar talks about caste as a product of sustained endogamy. Several historians who have charted the rise and progress of the Indian feminist movement do reflect that during its nascent stage in the seventies and eighties India, the movement was majorly centred within the city limits and its proponents being all upper-caste women.[8] It is evident that category woman has been largely homogenised and within this category the privileged caste women thrive. Hence it is imperative to say that subaltern women in Indian society lack enough agency and power that is usually placed in an advantageous caste stronghold.[9]

It will be interesting to mention another incident that also brought into focus a distinct paradigm of the caste question within the Indian feminist debates. The incident in discussion here is the ban on bar girl dancers in Mumbai in the year 2005 which resulted in the loss of livelihood of mainly lower caste women associated with the profession, while the narrative of 'dance bars being breeding ground of crime' was being controlled primarily by eminent members of the society belonging to the upper castes. The ban, as suggested by Sameera Dalwai's research[10] was coming from the system of 'Brahmanical patriarchy and its hegemonic ideas of women's chastity and sexuality'[11] that only limits the power of self-assertion of Dalit women, tagging their profession as 'bad', 'impure' and 'corrupted'.[12] It is however noteworthy that Dalit Bahujan feminists were, in fact supporting the ban while mainstream feminists, especially Marxist feminists, condemned it as an act of 'moral-policing' and on the grounds of respect of women's 'choice.' Dalit Bahujan

feminists welcomed the ban because they believed that bar dancing ultimately leads women from the suppressed castes into prostitution.; they instead demanded rehabilitation of the women who would lose their sources of income. The above incident also makes us look back on the practice of the Devadasi system[13] that made women from lower castes entirely dedicated to temples only to serve as dancers and sex workers. The system was a common practice among Dalit communities. In this system Dalit girls are married to a village god by their parents. These girls are then sexually exploited by the upper-caste landlords and rich men of the village. This system of religious sexual exploitation is found in parts of India such as Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Orissa.[14]

In the review essay of the book *Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader* [15] Kancha Ilya Shepherd offers a critical perspective of the above-mentioned viewpoint. Shepherd says that, as only Dalit women are forced into sex work, similarly, upper caste women are forced into a life of widowhood. Shepherd remarks that upper caste *dwija*[16] women are considered to be above the polluted domain of sex work, and hence are relegated to live a life of strict widowhood that entails a life full of hardships. Through the rise of education among *dwija* women, practices such as forced widowhood or sati in their cultures were abolished. But then again, Shepherd notes, Dalit women are not given the basic opportunity of education as upper caste women so that they can themselves shorn off the difficult job of prostitution that they are forced into.[17] Marxist feminists such as Nivedita Menon hold the position that sex work should be recognised as legitimate work and should be honoured and given the dignity that is deserved for labour.[18] However, Dalit Bahujan feminists do argue, a view that Shepherd reiterates, that Dalit women are forced into sex work and seldom make a choice of entering into it. Shepherd thus argues that upper caste women are erased from productive labour historically as this labour is only reserved for men and possibly lower caste women. A participation of upper caste women in these labourious work would only 'taint' them. What Shepherd says is definitely true if we look around our caste society; a lower caste woman could participate in farming, as domestic help, as manual labourer in a factory but, a *dwija* woman cannot. On the other hand, it can be seen that dalit women are hardly ever employed as cooks in upper-caste homes as their food can be polluted by the polluted touch of their caste. Rather, they may be hired to do the work of cleaning, washing clothes, and looking after the sick. Shepherd aptly analyses that though women from depressed castes can be a part of productive labour, they fail to demand the respect that *dwija* women can claim unless they are 'brahmanized': Dalit-bahujan feminism has to look at the roles of women in productive work and accessibility to public spheres of life. The *dwija* women now have better exposure to global forms of man-woman relations because of English education, which Dalit-Bahujan women do not have. But they are still anti-productive labourers because, ironically, educated dwija women think that production is pollution.[19]

Keeping the aforesaid argument in mind it can be observed that Marxist feminist's viewpoint on 'moral policing' or 'women's choice,' though important, it possesses an objection from the Dalit Bahujan feminist standpoints which unravels various complex markers in the lived realities of Dalit Bahujan women.

A similar discord can also be observed through the MeToo movement.[20] The MeToo movement that stirred up the world of social media in 2017 recalled sexual exploitation in various fields of film, media and even academia. Interestingly, when in Indian academia, survivors were disclosing the names of perpetrators, prominent feminists in India vocally voiced their concerns over the 'Name and Shame' campaign arguing in favour of 'due-process' and 'legitimization.' Dalit feminists protested against their privileged stand and complained against the tone-deafness of their arguments which conspicuously omits the question of caste altogether. Indeed, the mainstream feminists forget their privileged position and the fact that not all women, especially women from a lower caste and class, have the agency to follow 'due process' or seek legal aids. Moreover, Dalit feminists also refer to Bhanwari devi's[21] case to magnify the privileges of mainstream Indian feminism and its lack of recognising 'differences.' Bhanwari Devi, a *kumhar* [22] women, was gangraped and her husband was beaten up because of her protests against child marriage in the *gujjar*[23] community. Mainstream feminists showed solidarity with Bhanwari Devi at that time and as an aftermath took the opportunity to rally against sexual harassment of women at the workplace. Mainstream feminists' efforts and movement led to the establishment of the Vishakha guidelines in 1997.[24] However, from a Dalit Feminist point of view, Bhanwari Devi's caste status gets overlooked when mainstream Indian feminists singularize their movement focussing on sexual harassment and assault of women. Dalit Feminists proclaim that in a Brahmanical society, Bhanwari Devi's brave act makes her susceptible to public rape, and therefore *gujjar* men rape her to assert their caste supremacy over the *kumhar* family. "The Bhanwari Devi case, therefore, becomes the classic example of mainstream feminist appropriation as 'sexual atrocity' at the cost of caste,"[25] when actually the assault on Bhanwari devi's husband and the sexual assault on her was clearly a hate crime based on caste inequalities.

It is indeed quite intriguing to make a note of all of the multifarious facets of the gender and caste nexus that exists and to wrap one's head around the diverse perspectives that emerge through its comprehensive understanding. There is the presence of dual patriarchies – brahmanical and dalit which operates in a multi-level structure which requires a more nuanced approach. Uma Chakravarti describes, Brahmanical Patriarchy as:

A set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other and where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes. Patriarchal codes in this structure ensure that the caste system can be reproduced without violating the hierarchical order of closed endogamous circles, each distinct from and higher and lower than others. Further, brahmanical codes for women differ according to the status of the caste group in the hierarchy of castes with the most stringent control over sexuality reserved as a privilege for the highest castes. Finally, it incorporates both an ideology of chaste wives and pativrata women who are valorised, and a structure of rules and institutions by which caste hierarchy and gender inequality are maintained through both the production of consent and the application of coercion.[26]

In keeping the above definition in mind, we can also ask: is there a dalit patriarchy? Dalit political leaders, academicians and scholar answer this question in the negative. "Dalit politics' predominant take on dalit patriarchy has depended on emphasising its emulative format. They argue that there is no such notion as dalit patriarchy because all dalits are oppressed. Even if there are traces of patriarchal tyranny, it is brahmanical patriarchy that should be blamed for suggesting models of domination to dalit men."[27] Gopal Guru writes that, "Dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women which their high-caste adversaries had used to dominate them"[28] Therefore would it be right to say that dalit Patriarchy is oppressive when it attempts to become its brahmanized version? The answer to that question needs critical analysis. Brahmanical patriarchy is definitely a collaborative mechanism that works in a systematically hegemonic fashion.[29] However, it may not be entirely true if we look at it from a dalit women's perspective. In Gopal Guru's seminal essay 'Dalit Women Talk Differently' he uses the term 'dalit patriarchy' to question the unequal practices of patriarchy in dalit society.[30] Further than that the term has only been used sparingly by later scholars amidst dalit scholarship and dalit activism. Seldom do we see the focus on dalit women's issues inside the dalit community as a discrete problem which may demand special attention. Dalit women, indeed, speak about domestic abuse by their husbands which includes verbal abuses and physical assault[31] The patriarchal oppression imposes fear on dalit women which several dalit women activists have talked about. Baby Kamble, a dalit author, expresses her fear of being chastised by her husband and son when she was writing her autobiography. Kamble also says in an interview, "[w]hen working in the fields, we have to fear for our modesty and at home we fear our husbands. I ran a vegetable shop. Not a single day of my life was spent happily. Beatings, quarrels, crying, and starvation — these were routine. I was convinced that a Dalit woman is really insecure"[32] Baby Kamble's revelation is a telling anecdote on what a dalit woman's life is like. Similarly, Sujatha Gidhle's book *The Ant Among Elephants* (2017)[33] disclose the typical violence that is meted out to dalit women, a unique experience where the caste consciousness in dalit men is different from dalit women. In Gidhle's book, Satyam, the author's maternal uncle, despite his own struggles in grappling with his caste identity, is functional in controlling his sister's life: from her daily routine to the clothes, she wore. Gidhle talks about Satyam's challenges in the public sphere as opposed to his sister Manjula's challenges both in the public sphere and at home. For Manjula along with caste atrocities she had to face the strictures of religion and her family. Gidhle, in her book talks about the indiscernible manoeuvrings of caste and of gender through an insight into her 'untouchable' family, delving deep into generational history with a clear, objective perspective. In the day-to-day life, harassment of Dalit women takes the following forms: non-Dalits frequently use abusive and derogatory language when addressing Dalit women; non-Dalits refer to Dalit women as prostitutes or use caste names; non-Dalit supervisors or traders will often make sexual innuendoes to Dalit women."[34]

Sharmila Rege's book *Against* the *Madness* of *Manu* she attempts to chart her way to extricate the links between caste and violence against women.[35] Rege in her last prominent work attempts to decode the multifarious structure of caste and theorize an understanding with a deep focus through the lens of B.R. Ambedkar's works. Indeed, Sharmila Rege considered Ambedkar's works to be crucial for the Indian feminist movement. Rege focuses on caste's continuity through endogamy, a fact that Ambedkar has considered essential for the upholding of the caste circumference. As it has been mentioned before, Ambedkar's stress on caste as an endogamous arrangement and the way to break caste hierarchies through inter-caste marriages, give the feminist movement in India a significant leverage. Rege's reference to Ambedkar in her book brings to the forefront the understanding of caste through a gendered perspective. She says, "Ambedkar saw caste's exclusionary violence and subjugation of women

inherent in the very process that led to caste formation.[36] In the later chapters inquiry on Ambedkar's viewpoint will be discussed at length.

1.2. Position Of Dalit Literature In The Dalit Movement

Dalit literature is overarchingly a literature of protest and can be seen as continuing in the same tradition of protest that we have seen in Ambedkar and Phule's anti-caste and reformist movements. Toral Gajarawala says, "Dalit literature is inconceivable without the presence of a Dalit movement."[37] In several ways this statement holds itself true because Dalit literature cannot exist outside the purview of Dalit lives and is perpetually reflecting the impenetrable inner circle of their coarse lifestyles and answering the questions raised on their complex and convoluted conditions. To elaborate on the previous detail, it is acceptable to say that Dalit literature is almost entirely motivated by the registers of the Dalit movement. Conversely, Dalit Literature also acts as a powerful tool that stands to express the Dalit voice and agency where the prior is an interesting and important avenue of Dalit activism. Whether this is advantageous for the popular upgrade of Dalit literature or in some measures a responsibility, sometimes bordering on becoming a burden, that is to be carried by it, requires an immersive discussion which would only enrich this thesis.

Dalit autobiographies became a natural and all-encompassing part of the Dalit movement. From the period of 1960s India, Dalit literature gained prominence along with Dalit autobiographies. Arjun Dangle, the Marathi Dalit writer, editor, and activist affirms, "Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people, who as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality"[38] In Dangle's observation Dalit literature throws light upon the *chuachutt* (the practice of untouchability)[39] system of the caste in Indian society, a system so bleak, that finally engenders rebellion and movement. Dangle traces the beginnings of Dalit literature to BR Ambedkar. Though Dangle makes a brief reference to the writings of Buddha, Chokhamela, Mahatma Phule and S.M Mate[40], he maintains that Ambedkar's scholarship in the empirical study of caste, and his movement against caste hierarchy and oppression, are primarily responsible for pioneering the vociferous devotion to writing of the Dalit condition. Ambedkar's relentless activities gave Dalits a voice, an outlet for expression, and a sense of self-awareness, empowering them to seize and/or demand a dignified life through literature. He says that there is no coincidence that Dalit literature began in Maharashtra, the birthplace of Ambedkar. The Marathi literary circle saw a consistent rise of Dalit writers publishing their work through small publication houses, through the little magazines and the Dalit experience made its presence felt all through Maharashtra. Baburao Bagul, a prominent Marathi writer of Dalit literature says: "Dalit literature is not a Literature of Vengeance. Dalit Sahitya is not a literature which spreads hatred. Dalit Sahitya first promotes man's greatness and man's freedom and for that reason it is an historic necessity." Baburao Bagul's short stories exploring the dalit mindset made significant contributions in Dalit Sahitya in Marathi language.[41] "Proposing Dalit literature as a form of contemporary politics in the sphere of Indian literary culture, Marathi Dalit critic and writer Baburao Bagul presents Dalit literature as a modern, written, and Ambedkarite tradition that reconfigured modernity, invented new modes of writing, and imagined Dalit as an identity, experience, and perspective in modern Indian literary history. Dalit literature is human and democratic, Bagul argues, as it draws on the humanist legacy of Buddha, Christ, Phule, Ambedkar, and also the Western Enlightenment."[42] In Bagul's opinion modern Indian literature failed to incorporate the Dalit experience as it was ostensibly Hindu in nature and thus concentrated more on the lives and the perspectives of upper caste Brahmins, Kshatriya and Vaishyas, relegating the Shudras and ati Shudras as invisible. Therefore, the rise of Dalit literature in the Indian literary sphere was a reactionary result, an alternative. "Bagul traces the literary traditions of the untouchables back to Buddha and Christ, those crucial symbols of humanism, and also to the ideals of Western Enlightenment. It is precisely because of the conditions created by the colonial intervention, the Western literary tradition, Ambedkar's liberal thought, and the Dalit struggles, that Dalit writers developed a distinct perspective and discovered the untouchable heroes, themes, and thoughts from the philosophies of Phule and Ambedkar, Bagul suggests."[43] Sharankumar Limbale in his work, *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* [44] says that Dalit literature disregards mainstream form, content, and style. Limbale opposes the view that Dalit texts should be evaluated from mainstream literary theories. Indeed, mainstream literary theories cannot accommodate the literature of and by the discriminated and the oppressed. Consequently, a non-Dalit writer who have written about the Dalit condition, like Mahasweta Devi, Munshi Premchand, Girish Karnad and Mulk Raj Anand, would never be able to represent the true Dalit experience as only living the Dalit life and Dalit existence reveal the Dalit consciousness and translates into the literary text. Limbale also reflects on how Dalit literature has also been criticised for overemphasizing agony and pain and states that it is impossible for Savarna critics to fathom the incessant

humiliation and domination experienced by Dalit writers. Limbale also states that this kind of Savarna perspective comes from a place of arrogance and privilege which only defeats the Dalit movement at large. Moreover, Limbale counters critics who talk about the lack of literariness and the sense of aesthetic beauty in Dalit literature claiming that the beauty of Dalit literature lies in its stark reflection of reality and its aim is not to provide pleasure:

A major factor that distinguishes Dalit literature published by Dalits from that authored by non-Dalit authors, is the mode of expression. Certain emotions, such as rage, pity, nostalgia, and sorrow are characteristic of Dalit writers' writings about Dalits. In purposeful violation of the savarna tradition, the language utilised is vulgar and biting, and it is urgently prompted by personal agony and rejection. The usage of the speaker's original tongue lends sharpness to the voice. Savarna writers frequently portray these emotions inaccurately, which makes their portrayal difficult, insufficient, and harmful.[45]

As a literary movement Dalit literature continues to grow as new authors continue to add their individual voices to the collective outrage of resistance against caste-based discrimination and humiliation suffered for ages. In the present writers and critics are working to carve out a niche for Dalit voice in both Indian and International literary contexts. A new generation of writers are transforming Dalit literature from merely a narrative of humiliation and exploitation to include issues such as feminism, literary self-consciousness, individual introspection, while increasingly wrestling with the question of how mainstream this literature may become without losing its authentic Dalit identity.[46] Arjun Dangle's publication of Poisoned Bread in 1992[47] was the first-ever attempt to anthologize Dalit writings in English. Dangle has included speeches, stories, poems, memoirs, excerpts from autobiography, essays in Marathi Dalit literature in the anthology. The maximum of writings in Dalit literature has been in Marathi.

II. CONCLUSIONS: THE PRESENCE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN DALIT LITERATURE AND DALIT WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

It is definitely true that Dalit literature has strong roots in the autobiographical mode because the autobiographical mode is considered as the most authentic and original mode. Bhongle says that the entire Dalit literature is the most authentic because Dalit literature refuses to use wings of imagination and wants to base their writing in the authenticity of experience.[48] The authenticity of experience occurs through the retelling and recalling one's life, that is, in the autobiographical mode. Sarah Beth says that "One likely explanation is that a Dalit autobiography is understood to be a part of larger movement of Dalit assertion, and in this context, focusing on the divisions within the Dalit community is often perceived as counter - productive to the larger movement and thus is often silenced with the Dalit autobiographical narrative."[49] Bhogle's and Sarah Beth's statements proclaims pertinent yet varied rationale behind Dalit literature's predominance in the autobiographical mode. However, both critics do agree that Dalit literature will always be considered a part of the larger Dalit movement and not as distinct individual narratives only. In this context it is imperative to understand that Dalit autobiographical narratives relate with the others and incite others to come up with their own lived experiences. One needs to ponder upon the fact that though the autobiographical mode is only a personal story, the presence of the repetitive patterns of brutal torture and violent inhumanity belongs to whole communities of Dalits across the Indian subcontinent. The autobiographies are keen on revealing the 'collective-consciousness' of their community and therefore the -I of these autobiographies will not be described as an individual but the representative of all the suppressed people of the world.[50] Dalit literature with the rise of the Dalit Panthers movement inaugurated and celebrated protest poetry. However, the popularity and the impact of Dalit autobiographies are testament to the fact that no other medium could capture the naked truth of the insult, disgust, anguish, shame, exclusion, poverty, fear and despair that is part of the Dalit existence. The lived experiences of the Dalit people do not find such a out and out, lucid representation as it does in the genre of autobiography. There is no need to employ an invasive interrogation of the Dalit experience and instead we can wholly rely on their experience of life, their voice, and their memory to have a complete, intimate, and nuanced understanding of Dalit subjectivity.

It is important at this point to shift my focus to Dalit Women's autobiographies as a distinct field that needs special attention. Shubhendu Shekhar Naskar says "Dalit male writers refuse to accept feminine equality even in literary arena. This silence of male writers and stereotype presentation of the women show the way to an alternative voice from the women themselves. In their writing they do not follow any rigid literary theory. Instead, they express in an uncouth and impolite language- what they see and what they feel."[51] In the texts of Dalit Women's Autobiographies Dalit women do serve an alternative viewpoint to the hitherto Dalit autobiographies. The Dalit Women's subjectivity is presented to the readers and critics who then encounter a layered understanding of the already established Dalit existence- the oppression of the

community and the oppression of their women inside their homes. Moreover, the very act of writing their life-narratives they move from being only regarded as victims of Brahmanical oppression and present themselves as politically empowered individuals expressive of their own agency.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank everyone of her teachers and supervisors, and fellow scholars in her department.

REFERENCES

[1] Manjari Singh, and Bama Faustina Susairaj. "Dalit Text As Testimony: A Conversation with Bama." Indian Literature, vol. 60, no. 3 (293), 2016, pp. 23–44. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44478990. Accessed 1 May 2023.
[2] Bama Faustina.Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom Karukku. Parathi Puththakalayam, 2009.
[3] Uma Chakravarti, Gendering Caste, Sage Stree, 2018
[4] TK Rajalakshmi, "Women and caste" Gendering Caste by Uma Chakravarti. Frontline, June 19, 2019.
[5], Sunaina Arya. "INTRODUCTION to Dalit Feminist Theory." Editor's Introduction to Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader (2019): n. pag. Web.
[6] Ibid., p.2
[7] B. R. Ambedkar, CASTES IN INDIA: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development, Indian Antiquary Vol. XLVI (May 1917)
[8] UMA CHAKRAVARTI. "IN HER OWN WRITE: Writing from a Dalit Feminist Standpoint." India International Centre Quarterly, vol. 39, no. 3/4, 2012, pp. 134–45. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24394281. Accessed 1 May 2023.
[9] Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, 'Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender,' in Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (eds.),
Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 232–60
[10] Sameena Dalwai , Bans and Bar Girls: Performing Caste in Mumbai's Dance Bars; Women Unlimited
[11]Sameena Dalwai, DANCE BAR BAN: DOING A FEMINIST LEGAL ETHNOGRAPHY
[12] Ibid.,
[13] The religiously sanctioned Devadasi system in India exemplifies intersectional oppression of gender, caste, and sexuality. Historically, Devadasis, or "servants of God," were women wedded to God who performed temple duties and were considered sacral women with ritual powers. As part of her duties, the Devadasis offer sexual services to her patrons, invariably the economically and socially powerful patriarch/s in society. The Devadasis were not a monolithic community; there were caste-based segregations within the Devadasi community which delineated their social positions. Devadasis were drawn from castes lower in the hierarchy (non-Brahmins) and the Scheduled castes (Dalits).
[14] Tameshnie Deane, The Devadasi System: An Exploitation of Women and Children in the name of God and Culture, Journal of International Women's Studies, May,2022.
[15]Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, Dalit-Bahujan Feminism: A Newly Emerging Discourse, CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion,2021.
[16] dvija, (Sanskrit: "twice-born") in the Hindu social system, members of the three upper varnas, or social classes—the Brahmans (priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (warriors),
and Vaishyas (merchants)—whose sacrament of initiation is regarded as a second or spiritual birth.
[17] Shepherd, 2021.
[18] Ibid.,
[19] Ibid.,
[20] Me Too movement, awareness movement around the issue of sexual harassment and abuse of women in the workplace that grew to prominence in 2017 in response to news reports of sexual abuse by American film producer Harvey Weinstein.
[21] Bhanwari Devi was a government social worker from a lower-caste community. Her fearless pursuit to end the evil of child marriage enraged the upper caste. To silence her, she was later gang-raped by the landlord community. The ordeal did not just end here. Her struggle was met with complete apathy from the government, for which she worked. However, keeping Bhanwari Devi's case in focus, proper guidelines to deal with sexual harassment complaints at the workplace were set down in 1997 in the Supreme Court, known as the Vishaka Guidelines. Unfortunately, even after 26 years, Bhanwari Devi herself still remains ostracized from her village, even as the criminals roam absolutely scot free.
[22] Kumhar caste or potter caste.
[23] Gurjars, or Gujjars are OBCs and considered higher in the caste hierarchy than Kumhars.
[24] In 1997, the Supreme Court delivered a landmark judgment laying down guidelines to be followed by establishments in dealing with complaints about sexual harassment. "Vishaka Guidelines" were stipulated by the Supreme Court of India, in Vishaka and others v State of Rajasthan case in 1997, regarding sexual harassment at workplace. The court stated that these guidelines were to be implemented until legislation is passed to deal with the issue.
[25] Anandita Pan, After Violence: Dalit Women's Narratives and the Possibilities of Resistance, Journal of International Women's Studies, October 2022.
[26] Uma Chakravarti, Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens. Calcutta: Stree. 2003
[27] A Pan.
[28] Guru 1995, p.2549
[29] Ibid.,
[30] Ibid.,

[31] Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal and Wandana Sonalkar Dalit Women in India: At the Crossroads of Gender, Class, and Caste Global Justice: Theory Practice Rhetoric, 2015, p.70,
[32] Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon, We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement, 2008, trans. Wandana Sonalkar.2014.
[33] Sujatha Gidhle, Ants Among Elephants, Farrars, Strats and Giroux, 2017.
[34] Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal and Wandana Sonalkar p.69
[35] Sharmila Rege, Against the Madness of Manu: B.R Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy, Navayana, 2013.
[36] Rege, 2013, p.69.
[37] Toral Jatin Gajarawala , Three Burnings: An Introduction, Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and The Crisis of Caste, Oxford Academic Books, 2012
[38] A Corpse in the Well: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Autobiographies ed, Arjun Dangle, 1992.
[39] Untouchability is a form of social institution that legitimises and enforces practices that are discriminatory, humiliating, exclusionary and exploitative against people belonging to certain social groups. Although comparable forms of discrimination are found all over the world, untouchability involving the caste system is largely unique to South Asia. The term is most commonly associated with treatment of the Dalit communities in the Indian subcontinent who were considered "polluting".
[40] Ibid., Dangle.
[41] Baburao Bagul (1930–2008) was a famous Marathi writer, most popular with short stories. His noted works are, Jehva Mi Jaat Chhorli (1963), Maran Swasta Hot Ahe (1969) and Sud (1970).
[42] K. Satyanarayana, "The Political and Aesthetic Significance of Contemporary Dalit Literature." The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, vol. 54, no. 1, SAGE Publishing, Mar. 2019, pp. 9–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989417718378.
[43] Ibid.,
[44] Sharankumar Limbale Towards and Aesthetics of Dalit Literature in English Orient Longman (translated by Alok Mukherje)2004.
[45] Prunima Sharma and Khushboo Batra, Rewriting the Aesthetics of Dalit Literature, Literature & Aesthetics 32 (1) 2022
[46] Laura R Brueck "Mainstreaming Marginalized Voices: The Dalit Lekhak Sangh and the Negotiations over Hindi Dalit Literature." Claiming Power from Below: Dalits and the Subaltern Question in India. Ed. Manu Bhagavan and Anne Feldhaus. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008 (pp. 151-165).
[47] Arjun Dangle, Ed. Poisoned Bread, translations from modern Marathi Dalit literature, 1992.
[48] Rangrao Bhongle Dalit Autobiographies: An Unknown Facet of Social Reality.
Indian Literature 2002,46 (04),pp. 158-160.
[49] Sarah Beth, Hindi Dalit Autobiography: An Exploration. Modern Asian Studies, 2007.
[50] Bhongle
[51] Shubhendu Shekhar Naskar, Autobiography of Dalit Women: A Different form of Dalit Assertion, International Journal of Cultural studies and Social Sciences, 2017.