

‘Is the Plate Indian?’: Critiquing the Plate as a Politico-Cultural Arena in the Autobiographies of Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar

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Abstract

The Indian cuisine, rich for its deliciously aromatic spices and multifarious flavours is an inevitable menu in the intercontinental space. The relishing delicacy of the Indian plate is an obvious metaphor of its rich heritage and culture. But a curious interrogation into the prospects of foodies, reveal that the taste market is mainly dominated by the upper caste people and a strict hierarchical barrier is maintained in the name of the brahmanical order. Where the upper caste have varieties of ingredients to test their culinary skills, the lower caste, surviving in the same democracy, have their poverty and dehumanized social standard as the recipes and their hunger as the chief ingredient to make the restricted eatables, palatable. Thus, food in the Indian subaltern context is a political hot potato!

Referring to the feminine critique on the politics of the plate, I would concentrate on the autobiographies of Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble. The purpose being an effort to keep the gender (feminine), location (Maharashtra), caste (Mahar, low caste) static, of both the writers so as to appropriate the cultural ethnicities amid the diverse social patterns. ‘The plate’ in the context would replicate the space or the platform where the politics of hegemony is at play, in the typical Indian religious order. Through the feminist lens, I would attempt to bring into light the extent of hierarchical domination prevailing in the Indian context which leads to the quantitative and qualitative deprivation of food in the dalit’s plate. A socially secular country which seeks towards the hygienic and well balanced diet for all, is also ironically a cultural space where, as portrayed by Baby Kamble, the epidemic stricken dead cows/ buffaloes are thrown into the dalit’s plate to be devoured.

Key Words: Dalit, Brahmanical, Feminine, Autobiography, etc.

The history of autobiographical writings is marked to have its commencement from the West. The literary academia acclaims the genre of life narratives to be initiated by Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* (AD 397-98) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* (1789). After the two pioneering figures, many followed suit, adding multiple analytical modes to the self-writing genre. But the basic purpose behind the production of life narratives then, was

the manifestation of psychological and spiritual ideas. It was also significant, as it helped in gaining the historical knowledge of the time period of the narration. But most importantly, from the canonical perspective ‘glorifying the self’ was the chief purpose of the life narratives.

Interestingly, the genre of life narratives was not considered to be of a distinct mode in the literary context. It was only in the 20th century that the genre gained momentum, thus taking a long duration of years to make itself recognized as one of the important genres. Particularly during the Postcolonial period it flourished to its full, providing fresh and multiple perspectives to the reading and critiquing of it. Subsequently, despite being limited to the traditional literary texts, its form changed and autobiographical perspectives were even found to be present in the oral traditions, interviews, theatrical plays and in the recent times, in the social media and blogs. In the contemporary period those autobiographies are of the highest concern, which replicate the massive transformation undergone by the socially and culturally marginalized histories, especially those of the feminists, the Hispanics, the LGBTs, the Dalits etc. Thus, under the Postcolonial perspective, the autobiographical writings help propagate and theorize the identity issues, very much fitted under the umbrella of globalization. In the similar vein Linda Anderson substantiates the importance of the autobiographical representations of identities, from the Postcolonial perspective by quoting Paul Gilroy’s statement. ‘This historic emphasis also requires a new way of theorizing identity, unhooking it from nationhood and ethnicity, and thinking instead of the more difficult theoretical option of “creolisation, metissage, mestizaje, and hybridity.”’ (Quoted in *Autobiography*: p-115).

Coming to the Indian context, the autobiographical writings too witnessed a paradigm shift. The Postcolonial methodologies in narrating the self gradually got absorbed in the Indian writings as well. Hence, epistemological dimensions were formed in the autobiographical genre, where the focus of writing switched over basically from the mainstream to the marginalized texts and contexts. Although Indian writings do have certain level of coherence, typical to its socio-cultural ethos, but it won’t be appropriate to ignore the impact of the colonizer’s influence of expression in the Indian life narratives. Consequently, the Indian life narratives have, to a large extent got stimulated through the English style and after being substantially tempered with the colonizer’s style and grace, have flourished in making a space for autobiographical study as a special genre in the Indian literary discourse. “The literary renaissance that began with India’s contact with England made a remarkable contribution as it excited and stimulated the autobiographical impulse in Indians.” (R. C. Sinha97)

Thus, it could be observed that various historical, political and cultural diversities molded the representation of the self in the Indian narratives. In order to present the contemporary discourse of the life narratives, issues relating to the formation of identities under particular cultural background which was till now marginalized, is the chief concern of the writer that is typical to the Postcolonial perspective. Therefore, in this regard the paper proposes to seek through those identities which were marginalized in the Indian cultural context, but have

found voice mainly due to the spurt in the life narrative genre, typically befitting the parameters of the Postcolonial writings. For this, I would take the autobiographical endeavour of the Dalit writers so as to extricate the importance of self-narration leading to the emancipation of the multiple subjugations inflicted by the upper caste Hindus. In this regard, the paper would focus on the Dalit's plate, in order to substantiate the issues relating to the political and cultural norms which differ from that of the upper castes. I would take the life narratives of the two Dalit feminist writers, namely, Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble in order to substantiate my standpoint.

Since time immemorial, the Indian sub-continent is experiencing multiple diversities in its traditional and cultural practices. This diversity becomes unique when it comes through the hierarchy in the caste practices. Unfortunately, the division of labour that was initiated to define the Hindu caste order has led to multi-dimensional drawbacks. The castes which fall in the upper hierarchical order enjoy most of the democratic privileges, whereas those lying at the lower steps are segregated in almost all walks of life. Among these, the worst sufferers are the Dalits, meaning 'the downtrodden' but in the present context, it specifies the Hindus who are at the lowest rungs of the hierarchical order. For years, the Dalit conditions remained dormant and they were easily dominated and used at the hands of the upper castes. But, gradually the suppressed voices started getting audible. Particularly, after India got independence. The new amendments framed by the Indian constitution invoked the right to equality in every sphere of living. This right raised the Dalit consciousness, (though only in a small quantity) and the Dalits started raising voices in the form of, mainly social activism and movements. Most remarkably, the Dalit activism witnessed its high rise chiefly due to the cultural and political movement spearheaded by Dr B. R. Ambedkar. Being the active political hero of the Dalits, Ambedkar showed the ways and measures in order to annihilate the caste atrocities.

Remarkably, both the writers of the life narratives taken in the present paper are considerably influenced by the Ambedkarite movement. For both the writers, education seems to be the strongest weapon to resist against the caste hierarchy. The acquisition of this weapon is chiefly the gift of Ambedkar, who quite vociferously propagated the Dalits to acquire it, in almost all his speeches and writings. Baby Kamble proves the statement by quoting lines from Ambedkar's speech that he had made during his visit to the nearby village where she lived. "From now onwards you have to follow a different path. You must educate your children...Teach them good things. Send them to schools. The result will be there for you to see. When your children begin to be educated, your condition will start improving." (*PWB* 64)

The Dalits did succeed in gaining education, which gave them enough strength to resist against caste based tyrannies. Subsequently, the Dalit in the literary arena voiced their resistance through their writings. As a result of all this, Dalit literature emerged, which basically seems to be the literature of resistance. Among all the genres of literary importance,

where Dalit literature is seemingly visible, the autobiographical representations proved to be most pertinent. It honestly asserts and reclaims the self through the writers lived experiences. But what is most significant in the Dalit autobiographical context, is that it is not limited to the personal inner conflicts only, it goes ahead to depict a vivid and clear perception of the politics of hegemony influencing the Dalit lives. In this regard Sharmila Rege insists on reclaiming autobiographies as *testimonios*. ‘Dalit *testimonios* have not only washed out the “I”, an outcome of bourgeois individualism, and displaced it with the collectivity of the Dalit community; but by bringing details of lives into the public domain, they have also challenged the communitarian control on the self’ (Regein Afterword of *WML323*).

Thus, multiple perspectives are found after an in-depth analytical and comparative study is made between the Dalit experiences of life writing with that of those belonging to the higher strata of the social hierarchy, specific to the Indian context. Hence, Dalit autobiographies could appropriately be put forth under Linda Anderson’s analysis of the autobiographies written by the oppressed class of any society. “autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through its cultural inscription and recognition” (Anderson 104)

The lines quoted above, quite evidently point out certain perspectives, befitting the Dalit issues, which are clearly picturized in the Dalit life narratives. At this juncture, it would be appropriate to focus on the politics of exclusion as far as the living conditions are regarded. Therefore, the paper focuses on the analysis of the impact of certain cultural practices that renders the low castes most vulnerable and segregated. The paper would, in elaborate testify the two autobiographies as far as the eating habits are concerned which would irrevocably throw light upon the politics of hegemony, persisting in the Indian cultural milieu, just in order to keep a systematic control over the caste hierarchy, restricting to a large extent, the upward mobility of the suppressed class.

Deprivation of food and hunger is inevitably a part and parcel of the Dalit existence, as is depicted quite significantly in most of the Dalit narratives. Sharankumar Limbale, an eminent Dalit writer, in his autobiographical narrative points out the intense struggle for survival, when even the meanest source of nutrition was taken care of with great sensibility. “We stored *bhakris* in the wooden chest and ate them with the curry from time to time. The chest was full of cockroaches in the curry kept in clay pots. We threw the cockroaches away, and ate the curry” (Limbale 42-43)

This story of deprivation of food and life full of misery is inevitably present in almost all the life narratives of the Dalits. But the purpose behind considering the two narratives particularly in the present paper, is to exemplify the Dalit deprived condition, written by female writers, as it is evident that females are the better critics than their male counterparts, as far as the prospect of food and the importance of kitchen is considered in order to analyze the socio-cultural standards of the respective community. The two Dalit females are found to be writing in detail, the ways of the Dalits in preparing food through the cheapest ingredients

available at hand. Thus, Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan*, originally written in Marathi, later translated into English by Maya Pandit and named as *The Weave of my Life* was published in the year 2008 and Baby Kondiba Kamble's *Jina Amucha*, the Marathi original of *The Prisons We Broke* was also published in English in 2008, speaks volumes regarding the degraded social standards of the Dalits and also their struggle towards the resistance against the multi-faceted tyrannies.

An in-depth study of the two life narratives produced by the feminist writers gives vivid scope to analyze Dalit life through the feminist lens. But the intention of the paper is not to highlight any of the perspectives relevant to the feminist ideology of critiquing the narratives, rather to focus on the cultural diversities leading to the wreckage of the democratic rights that could be claimed by any citizen of the independent nation. Specifically those diversities which involve the politics of the chief source of survival i.e., food. What follows is a clear and vivid analysis of the politics of food that is involved in the Indian cultural context, which is a metaphor of the socio-economic standard of its citizens in consideration with the two life narratives.

The strict maintenance of the caste hierarchy gives immeasurable suffering to the Dalits. Lack of proper nutrition is always a cause of worry for them. To adjust with whatever meagre they find is the usual appetite of the Dalits. Urmila speaks about this scarcity through her experience: "So we learnt to eat whatever was given to us without complaining. We could not say, 'I'm not hungry now; I'll eat it later' for the simple reason that one would never be sure whether any food would be left over to eat later." (WML 95)

Baby goes even a step ahead in depicting the vulnerability of the new mothers, who after delivering the baby have nothing to fill the void after delivering the baby. "There is a saying that a black cow can survive even on thorns. Our women were like that proverbial black cow. Even on occasions when they had a right to be indulged a bit, they had to fill their stomachs with thorns to stay alive." (PWB 57)

Abject poverty and dehumanized standard of living reduced the Mahars to exist in no better than animal like situation, where hunger led to fight for even the bites of food. "You had two bites, I had only one.' Or, 'Now wait, your turn is over.' Or 'He had one bite just now, now it's my turn!'" (WML 20)

Baby abhors this animal like existence and blames the high castes for this low standard of existence. She brings a very powerful picture of the Dalits' existential issue.

We were just like animals, but without tails. We could be called human only because we had two legs instead of four. Otherwise there was no difference between us and the animals. But how had we been reduced to this bestial state? Who was responsible? Who else, but people of the high castes! They destroyed our reasoning, our ability to think. We were reduced to a condition far worse than that of the bullocks kept in the courtyards of the high castes. The bullocks were at least given some dry grass to eat. The bullocks ate the

grass and slogged for their masters. But we were merely given leftovers. We ate the leftovers without complaining and labored for others. (*PWB* 49)

Paradoxically enough, the Mahar women, for their duties throughout the year, towards the upper castes, have to go round 'begging' for food instead of acquiring it as a matter of right. They would be carrying out the customary Mahar duties like labouring in the fields, weaving baskets of different shapes and sizes, disposing of dead animals or beating the dhol during the festivities of the upper castes. But as compensation for their toil, the Dalit women have to go round begging. Urmila, in the similar context vents out their adverse condition, when during the festive season of Holi, after working hard for the upper castes, the Mahars would get excited to get something in return:

They would be excited and eager to go to the houses of the upper caste Kulwadis, Marathas and brahmins to beg for the festive food. Someone would say, 'Last year I managed to build a compound around X's chilli crop, all alone. At that time the bitch didn't even piss on my hands. But I won't spare her today. I'll demand food to last me three whole days.' (*WML*50-51)

But all their expectations would be sided off when they would get all the leftovers, in a thrown away gesture:

They would carry with them separate containers and pots for collecting various dishes. But the Kulwadi women who gave them food would pour everything together in their baskets. Whatever they wanted to give---dal, vegetables, kheer---would all be poured on the rice, in a mixed mound. Women would bring back basketsful of rice, in which many things were mixed. (*ibid*, 51)

Feeding upon the dead animals is a frequent point of discussion in both the life narratives. It would be a feasting time when there was an outbreak of epidemic among the cows or buffaloes. The Mahars would bring the dead cows/buffaloes from the upper castes' house, instead of disposing them off and would devour every part of the animal with great relish. Baby gives the heart rendering account of the carcasses of the dead animals, which would give out such a foul stench in the house of the upper castes, that it would be difficult for them to even drink water. At this, the Mahars would be summoned to carry the carcasses away. The Mahars, on the other hand would leap with happiness at the prospect of getting plenty of meat to feed upon and also to preserve for future use.

The Mahars considered animal epidemics like diphtheria or dysentery a boon. Every day at least four or five animals would die. The internal organs of the dead animals would decay in stages... The inside of some animals would be putrid, filled with puss and infested with maggots. There would be a horrid, foul smell! It was worse than hell! But we did not throw away even such animals. We cut off the infected parts full of puss, and convinced ourselves that it was now safe to eat the meat. (*PWB* 85)

The pitiful condition shows the plight of the Dalits in the course of their struggle for survival. For this, the writers blame the upper castes. “We were masters only of the dead animals thrown into those pits by the high castes. We had to fight with cats and dogs and kites and vultures to establish our right over the carcasses, to tear off the flesh from the dead bodies.” (ibid, 49)

However, the habit of eating dead animals declined as Ambedkar raised their consciousness against the practice of such mean ways of sustenance. He announced the Dalits to uplift their social standards by resisting in a systematic way and reclaim their rightful identity. Subsequently activism started, mostly in Maharashtra, as the state witnessed the maximum impact of Ambedkar, but social awareness spread all over India and gradually through various modes of resistance, the Dalits did find their actual identity in the globalized society. What is intriguing to point out at this juncture, is the intense diversity in the Indian plate. Where the lower castes have minimum resources to fill their stomach, the upper castes have varieties of stuff to opt from, in order to satiate their hunger. As Urmila puts it, though bit humorously, but the lines speak of the wide chasm pertaining in the cultural and economic standards of the different castes.

When my brother Shahu returned from Mumbai, he would almost drool when he mentioned something called srikhanda which, he said, was supposed to be eaten with puri. He said it looked like the ointment we applied on skin infections. I was quite mystified. Ointment yet sweet? How can you eat such a thing? What did it taste like? Again words like ‘patwadi’, ‘sandge’, ‘dhapate’, ‘khakre’ and ‘methkut’ made me feel very curious.’ (WML 93)

Many such anecdotes would fill pages, if the cultural diversity is analyzed from the perspective of the quality and quantity of food available in the economically as well as culturally diverse plates of the Indian sub-continent. More specifically, when it comes to define the plate in terms of the caste hierarchy, then the Dalit autobiographies are an important tool. As they explicitly reveal the politics of power involved to suppress those, who are already socially and culturally subservient.

Abbreviations:

LGBT: Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender.

WML: *The Weave of My Life*.

PWB: *The Prisons We Broke*

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