

Dalit Personal Narratives: An Account of Re-contextualization of Indian Religions

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Abstract

Autobiography as a genre of literature explores an individual's journey from known to unknown. It is a kind of mirror in which an individual reflects his/her own image. Dalit autobiography is a recently developed phenomenon as a part of minor literature. Dalit woman's autobiography in comparison to Dalit man's autobiography is profoundly different in regard to life experiences and the process of self-creation and self-consciousness. The present paper is an attempt to understand how a Dalit woman's identity is defined by herself within the complex structure of Indian society where class consciousness and social status prevail in the purview of orthodox religion and rigid caste system. This study makes a comparative study of two dalit women autobiographies- Bama's Karukku (2000) and Baby Kamble's The Prisons We Broke (2008). Being victims of caste discrimination both dalit women writers expose inhuman aspects of dynamics of caste, class, religion and gender under the pretext of religious conversion. Bama feels a sense of estrangement and alienated within her own community after her conversion from one religious order to another religious order. Baby Kamble happens to experience religious conversion as a form of ritual pollution. This study probes how religious conversion proves as façade for dalit people on realistic ground. It also explains that these Dalit women writers create their new identity in their own way through education, self motivation and social activism- a journey from context sensitive to context free.

Key words: Caste, religion, Dalits, re-contextualization, assertion of self-identity

Dalit personal narrative as a genre is comparatively new in Indian literature. It was after independence that a few among Dalit who got chance of modern education started articulating their experiences. The coming of several Dalit autobiographies in the last few years has thus demanded a new initiative to understand them and to rehabilitate them. The present study is an endeavour towards an understanding of Dalit personal narratives and to anticipate perceptual structures in them. When we talk about Dalit autobiographies, Dalit women autobiographers are still faceless in the mainstream literary circles in comparison to Dalit men autobiographers. Since only a few Dalit women have written their autobiographies. Most of these have been written in regional languages and due to inaccessible reach to particular regional languages, the attempts have rarely been made to translate these writing into English. A few Dalit Women's personal narratives have been translated into English in recent time. Among them Bama's autobiography titled *Karukku* (2000) and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) are most popular.

Since the caste system in India has been one of the greatest detaching forces that splits human beings into higher castes and lower castes (Dalits primarily). This division is backed by certain religious sanctions, based on concepts such as pureness, pollution, and superiority-inferiority. Due to this demarcation, the caste system with its innumerable versions of super ordination and subordination, its doubts and contradictions, merits and demerits, - is able to sustain itself across different regions of India in varying degrees of rigidity. "Modernization in India is a movement from context sensitive to context free." (Ramanujan) This idea of A.K. Ramanujan seems best flourish in Dalit personal narratives. Since the caste system is a fact of life, Hindu worldview recognizes an individual ego merges into the communal super ego. Autobiography as a genre cannot flourish in this ethos. Dalit autobiographies are used as a weapon to display the flow of the Dalit conscious self from context sensitive to universalization. In Indian society systems of meaning are elicited by context and they never raised the question of whether there are universals of other types. Hegel shrewdly noted this Indian's slant "Bravery is a virtue" as a universal law for all human being, for the Hindus on the contrary "Bravery is a virtue of Kshatriyas". (Ramanujan)

If we put the Indian religious system within the framework of Maxweber, (Ramanujan) who distinguished it between traditional and rational religion, that traditional religion attack problems opportunistically. The two fundamentals of religion are sacred and profane. Sacred is rich and white, profane is poor and dark. This duality is found almost in all sect of Hindu religion, which automatically renders a hierarchical social structure. It is argued that the caste system was a by-product of political motivation which was supported by religious sanctions. While the rational religions are logically more coherent and more phrased. As Dr. Murali Manohar states that the non-Brahmin movements talked about

creating a new society with a new religion based on the universal ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity as put forward by French revolution in 1789. Jyotiba Phule in Maharashtra, E. V. Ramasami who is popularly known as Periyar in Tamil Nadu, Narayan Guru in Kerala and B.R. Ambedkar who is acclaimed as a symbol of revolt against all the oppressing features of Hindu society (Manohar 43) were the prominent figures who logically constructed the context free religion.

This journey of re-contextualization of Indian religious system from traditional to rational can be traced back in Dalit literature. Specifically Dalit personal narratives provide a platform to flourish the new re-contextualized religious order in Indian society. *Karukku*, a Tamil autobiography by Bama and *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble both elaborates how the Dalits converted from one religion to another religion are still subjected to subordinations.

Karukku is a Tamil word means palmyra leaves with their serrated edges on both sides which are like double edged swords; it also means freshness and newness. Bama's work also functions as two edged sword, on the one hand it decentralizes the established structure and challenges the oppressors who have enslaved and disempowered the Dalits. On the other hand it reiterates the need for a new society with ideals such as justice, equality and love. Bama had to forego her 'real' self and travel through the spiritual realms of Christianity and thus her embracing of Christianity can be understood as 'a fuller radicalization of the self, not a spiritual conversion'. Bama, who is greatly lured by the ideals of God in Christianity, believes God shows the greatest compassion for the poor and oppressed but she realizes "there is a great deal of difference between the Jesus in the Bible and the Jesus who is made to known through daily practices and worships." (Bama 85)

Mulk Raj Anand suggests three alternatives for Dalit's redemption- Machine, Christianity and Gandhi. Bama finds faults even in Christianity. She converted from Dalit to Christian but realizes that Christians also follow the same system of Hinduism, Caste hierarchy, caste subordination and exploitation. "The upper caste Christian had their own cemetery elsewhere." (25) The non-dalit Christians never take in the dalit Christians into their fold.

She came across the harsh reality that religion itself is formulaic. The double perspective enables her to understand the hypocrisy and insincerity of the nuns and priests in the convent life. To acclimatize in new religion Dalits have to force to live according the Christian culture. But religious conversion in India has hardly contributed making remarkable changes in the lives of Dalits. Because, even after their conversion to other religions they are still looked down upon by their upper caste neighbors. Religious conversion does not necessarily bring emancipation in a Dalit's life. Hence, conversion is a debated question

among Dalits even today. Bama's autobiography is full of such questions. Being a Dalit she has always led a hard life. Through hard work and perseverance she completes her college education and becomes a teacher at a convent. Her reason of taking up the job is to help the Dalits. Unfortunately she couldn't carry on it because she came to a realization that majority of the church authorities were from the upper caste who deliberately discriminated against people from the low caste. When the situations became unbearable to her, she finally resigned and went back to her village to join the community life.

Bama realizes that the life of duplicity is completely alienated from her environment; she decides to leave the religious order. Having come out of the religious order Bama feels a sense of fulfillment and belonging to the Dalit community. This religious betrayal leads a powerful sense of change, of changing notions of identity, existence, and self-discovery. Her returning in village symbolizes the courage to face insecurity of life but not to feel alienated or compromised. She never regrets about leaving convent job rather she regrets that she unnecessarily spent seven long years maintaining a false social position. In a metaphorical language Bama celebrates her freedom saying:

I feel certain contentment in leading an ordinary life among ordinary people. I can breathe once again independently and at ease, like a fish that has at least returned to the water, after having been flung outside and suffered distress. ...I am like a bird whose wings are broken, it is protected only if it stays with its cage unable to fly...I don't know when my wings will heal and gain strength to fly again yet I know I am moving forward slowly step by step. (104)

It indicates the unshakeable belief and eternal spirit to breakdown everything that obstructs the creation of an equal and just society.

The Prisons We Broke by Baby Kamble also concerns about a head on confrontation with Brahmanical hegemony on the one hand and with patriarchal domination on the other. This personal narration brings alive a world that is constituted by differences in location. The difference is not only in terms of physical marginalization but also on the margins of the social imagery. They were alienated by being cut off from the village as unclean, impure, polluting and untouchable. But more than that they represent the composite apparatus of Brahmanical dominance perpetrated through superstitions, illiteracy, ignorance and oppressive practices.

Though the Hindu religion considered Mahars as dirt, yet they upheld Hindu principles with great sanctity. Putrajas and possessed women are common in the village – the possessed women are greeted with respect that they could speak about the future of Maharwada and can bless them with good wishes. So they often practice rituals that are

taught by the same religion which consider them as dirt. Hinduism as a religion of animals reduces Dalits to inanimate objects. Kamble not only blames Hinduism for ill-treatment given to the Dalits, but also condemns it as a religion of animals. As she says:

What a beastly thing this Hindu religion is! Let me tell you it's not prosperity and wealth that you enjoy. It is the very life blood of the Mahars. (Kamble 56)

One can find Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's influence on Baby Kamble as self evident. Here Kamble is opening a new chapter in the Dalit families. She has been successful in opening and continuing in Grocery shop in the Dalit village. Inspired by Ambedkar's call, both Damu and baby Kamble send their children to school for education despite unavailable and unaffordable resources. Baby Kamble's autobiography provides evidence to the contrary reading of the conversion decision. The Mahars mostly the old generation from several villages met regularly at the Chawdi to debate and discuss the issues. The debate is about the intervention of Christianity as a source of ritual pollution. So did oppose Ambedkar too. While the modernist Mahars argues that Ambedkar's attempt to culturally delink Dalits from Hinduism through conversion was an attempt to consolidate the hold of modernity and escape from the context sensitivity of orthodox-cal Hindu religion. When Dalits have been asked to go the schools, the elders of Dalit wadas go in the opposite direction suggesting to the educated. Thus there are contradictory statements among Dalits themselves from one generation to another.

By religious conversion Bama detached from the Hindu religious order. Although she enters into the realm of other Christian religious order, it provides a space like 'Diaspora' to her who straddles between two cultures. This is a stage of neutrality and the originating point of re-contextualization begins from here. By conversion a new context becomes platform to evaluate or the new contextualization of the old order. But this journey of Bama is somewhat different from the author of *The Prisons We Broke*, Baby Kamble. There she converted in Buddhism and finds Ambedkar's Buddhist religion almost in utopian or perfect form. The reason might be the re-contextualization of the new Buddhist religion by Ambedkar himself. As he himself was present at the place where Mahars got converted to Buddhism in 1956, while taking oath he clears this thing-"Our lord Buddha is not incarnation of lord Vishnu or Brahma or Shiva". Here the issue of conversion has been linked to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who had shown the way to Dalits to convert into Buddhism. For him, Buddhism is a neutral religion than Christianity or Hinduism as it believes in casteless religion.

It indicates the realistic fundamentals of the new religion. But Bama realizes the harsh reality of the perennial religious order after accepting Christianity. She was born in Hindu society as a context sensitive later converted to Christianity with aspirations of being context free. But that was actually a movement of one context sensitive order to another. This is the

time when she returns to her community again that can be an attempt to be context freeness, because it is the matter of conscience. She confronts to her conscience which leads path of not to context sensitive but to the context free and universalization.

Thus it can be concluded that most of the Dalit autobiographies are tales of several oppressive social forces, the growing perception and mature imagination of Dalit writers, capture the tensions which grow out of a continuous battle between loss of identity and assertion of self. They evoke a pain that is mostly personal yet they narrate their stories with a realization that the other oppressed class also suffer in the same way. This process of realization is the unique characteristics of Dalit personal narratives. They provide the space to explore the particularized Indian religious order with the universalized order. One is tempted to conclude from the narratives of both Bama and Kamble that neither Hinduism nor Christianity offers any concrete solution to the agony of Dalits. Both take the point of view that the Dalits can liberate themselves from the shackles of suppression and subordination through their own effort of education and social activism. These narratives have shown how education can be an instrument for Dalits to stand against injustice, discrimination and untouchability. Therefore these books become the harbinger of an awakening and a reiteration of Dalit's freedom to question, rebel and reinterpret the religious order.

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