

**ESTRANGEMENT, CONSCIOUSNESS
AND ASSERTION: A SELECTED STUDY
ON AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF DALIT WOMEN**

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ABSTRACT

The Postmodern era witnessed a spurt in the third world writings, which were kept at margins by the Eurocentric terms of reference of Literature. The recent socio-politico-cultural trends have played a dominant role in making these marginalised voices perceptible. Writings of the third-world have been an outcome of the resistance of the marginalised for their rightful position in the society. Under the rubrics of Postcolonial studies in India, 'Dalit Literature' has emerged as a resistance to the canonical, mainstream writings. It gradually merged as an integral part of postcolonial studies, where the issue of identity played a pertinent role.

This dissertation has taken up an in-depth study of the literature of Dalits that attempts to bring into light the reasons behind the silence in the articulation of Dalit women. When the issues of identity politics and self assertion are concerned, writings of Dalit men are more prominently visible than that of Dalit women. Their gender identity often makes Dalit women more vulnerable to the patriarchal pattern of the Indian society, and their caste identity places them absolutely unprotected on the face of socio-cultural atrocities. Analyzing literature written by a female Dalit writer is, therefore, more difficult and challenging than it appears. In this study, the special standpoint would be, to analyze the life narratives of selected Dalit woman writers, like Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble and Bama and bring out the issues atypical to the Dalit women.

The history of India tells the tale of the Dalits as a deprived, subordinate class. The mythical *Varna* stratification of the caste system kept them segregated as 'untouchables' in the realms of the social order. In the process of segregation, Dalit women were found to be the 'worst traps' because along with caste and class

subjugation, they had to bear the burden of patriarchy. However, after India gained independence, special rights and privileges were provided to the backward classes by the constitution, including Dalits and women, to overcome the social and economic handicaps. Only then through education and financial upliftment, Dalit women found voice to articulate their lived experiences.

In the course of this research it was found that several social and political conditions and certain dominant voices of the marginals gave the Dalit women, power and strength to stand up for their rights and claim their rightful identity in the democratic nation. Dr B. R. Ambedkar was one of the most pertinent voices of all that inspired most of the Dalits, both men and women, to stand up for themselves. Next, education proved to be one of the most powerful weapons that paved a unique path towards self assertion, and from bleak twilight of estrangement, Dalit women travelled towards the bright light of assertion.

The autobiographies by Dalit women selected in the dissertation would substantiate through lived experiences, the factors empowering the Dalit women in particular and other marginalised section of the society in general. It would emphasise the fact that through self retrospection and enquiry, one could bring about a revolution of a just and empowered social condition. For the aforementioned purpose the dissertation is divided into five chapters including the Introduction and Conclusion.

The first Chapter is an analysis of caste system in India, second is based on a discussion on Third World Feminism with an attempt to locate Dalit feminism in its context. Third and fourth Chapters are an attempt to read the autobiographies and autobiographical novels of Dalit women like Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble and Bama in the light of feminism of the Third World and emphasise on how they have reclaimed

their identities and empowered themselves by writing their autobiographies. And lastly the Conclusion sums up the discussion focussing the journey of Dalit women from estrangement and subjugation to assertion through consciousness raising.

Life narrative in this case, is understood as a methodology in autobiographical research. The researcher uses various empirical sources (autobiography, oral narratives, documents – both official and personal – diaries, interviews etc) and techniques (triangulation of information and an in-depth analysis of the sources). The thesis follows MLA Handbook – (7th edition).