

The Pedagogical Potential of Dalit Life Writings

Meenakshi Malhotra

Abstract

This paper explores the pedagogic potential of Dalit literature and life writings, especially by women and argues that the generic instabilities and the generic challenges posed by Dalit literature and life writings offer an epistemological pathway to its teaching and learning. Further, in its blurring of boundaries of the political and literary, it paves the way to a genuine interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary. Third, Dalit literature can involve and elicit many responses beyond the intellectual and as such, be read along the register of affect and invoke empathy and understanding. As such, it often collapses and reduces the distance between the writer/author(subject) and the object of knowledge, which is Dalit experience.

Keywords: life narratives, pedagogy, literary, translation, affect, aesthetics.

In proposing to explore the fracturing of identities and construction of subjectivities in contemporary India, through the medium of literature, and life writings by Dalits, historically one of the most oppressed caste groups in Indian society, I am following an oft-iterated line of enquiry. Dalit literature and life writings are often written by first generation learners, children of unschooled and illiterate parents, and are not easily assimilated into the Western theoretical and epistemological paradigms of life writing studies, which is still largely the dominant model (though often challenged). Further, the genre of autobiography or life writing is not common to Indian literature or culture nor do most Indian life narratives conform to the generic prescriptions of autobiography (Kumar, 2010), so many Indian theorists prefer the concept of 'memoir'

or 'personal narratives' (Kumar, p. 4). Nor do these writings or literature conform to the classical aesthetic theories of Brahmanical aesthetics or "savarna" standards of writings.

Instead of valorising the individual, Dalit life writings stress the aspect of social documentation and the inscription of experiences of collective oppression and marginalization. As such, they challenge the assumption that the Dalit is not entitled to lay claim to the I, either his/her identity or subjectivity. Most genres of Dalit literature are based on Dalit life experiences, but none more so and more directly than Dalit autobiography. Autobiography or life writing has become the preferred genre of many marginalized and oppressed communities worldwide. In her 'introduction' to her English translation of Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, Arun Prabha Mukherjee remarks that the emphasis on "the authenticity of experience" (Mukherjee, 2003, p. xxxv) validates the genre and its capacity to reflect real life experience. This question of authenticity continues to inform and beleaguer Dalit literature which asks whether non-Dalit writers could write about and represent the nuances of Dalit experiences and/or subjectivity.

Dalit life writings are enormously important in a context where most Dalits had been denied any education or the right to have one. It is instructive here to remember Om Prakash Valmiki's experiences at his school, narrated in *Joothan* (Valmiki), where the headmaster made him sweep and clean the school premises. Given the blatant injustice which Dalits as a group had to encounter, Dalit life writings assume great significance since they are seen as providing a voice to the silent voiceless members of the community and as such seen as a shared experience of the entire community.

Dalit life writings also function as a form of historiography. It is important to recall that Dalit literature is not unique in its use of forms of life-writing as tools of historiography, according to Udaya Kumar. Life-writing has been an important form of history writing, and many such writings focus less on the 'personal lives' of their authors, "the acting subject inserts itself into acts of enunciation as a witness to history rather than as a subject of unique private experiences." Further the preponderance of Dalit life writing in Dalit literature is not really an empirical matter, it has less to "do with their quantitative preponderance than the paradigmatic status of the genre of autobiography in Dalit literary production" (Kumar, 2013,

pp. 158-59). The prominence of personal narratives in the canon of Dalit writing has given rise to the view that Dalit writing needs to be read not in accordance with the aesthetic categories of the genre, but in reference to the authenticity of experience. For Dalit writers, the decision to eschew these aesthetic mediations is often the result of a conscious choice, since their professed aim is to focus attention on the dire conditions of Dalit existence and experience. Their writing is hard-hitting and often visceral, as it bases itself on the dehumanizing situation of the Dalit and the exploitation and oppression faced by them. The narratives further eschew the framework of aesthetics itself as a framework that resulted from the epistemic oppression of Brahmanical aesthetics, standards of reference and aesthetic appreciation. Their aim is to foreground the systemic and systematic oppression they have been subjected to.

Where this paper hopes to constructively intervene is in propounding an argument that it is the generic instabilities and the generic challenges posed by Dalit literature and especially life writings that offer an epistemological pathway to its teaching and learning. To cite an example from within Dalit literature, many Dalit women's autobiographies focus on interlocking oppressions of caste and gender, which are socio-cultural concepts which underpin our existence. Simultaneously they look at hierarchies within class, caste and gender and the mutually reinforcing structures of oppression and exploitation therein, knowledge domains covered in Sociology, Economics, Women's and Gender Studies and of course Dalit Studies. Moreover, in its disregard for the blurring of boundaries of the political and literary, it paves the way to a genuine interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary. Different perspectives are of considerable value to disciplines like history or sociology that have used the life narratives of women across a wide spectrum of spaces, times and classes in order to chart cartographies of struggle and to gain a more complete idea of societies and their histories.

Third, Dalit literature can involve and elicit many responses beyond the intellectual and as such, be read along the register of affect and invoke empathy and understanding. The social sciences have as their intellectual underpinnings philosophical strands of thought like focusing on the particularities of 'lived experience' and promoting empathetic understanding. As such, it often collapses and reduces the distance between the writer/author (subject) and the object of knowledge, which is Dalit experience.

In their work on *Teaching Life-Writing Texts*, Miriam Fuchs & Craig Howes (2008, 2016, Introduction) articulate how life narrative texts could serve as a conduit to other subjects and debates. In the classroom context, these texts provide opportunities to promote reflexivity, an understanding of the pain of the other. The pedagogical functions of life narratives also extends to, potentially and actually, throwing the spotlight on submerged, invisible lives so as to bring them into focus and invite scrutiny. Testimony is one of the forms which emerged from diverse narratives—and experiences of violence and one which offers a witnessing of the lives of others. Looked at in this way, life narratives could offer a genuine opportunity to enquire and start a conversation addressing issues of diversity and difference—social, cultural, sexual, ethnic—in the space of the classroom. Here, a caveat may be that ‘diversity’ and difference, especially in the Western academic context, may seem like a patronising and tokenistic gesture, where a single African or Asian student in an otherwise all-white department is showcased as a lip service paid to the idea of diversity and difference. In order for this pedagogy to translate into a genuine engagement with other cultures and their cultural norms and forms, the insights of standpoint feminism may be of some use.

According to feminist theorists, narratives that emerge from a historically deprivileged perspective have greater epistemological validity than knowledge which emerges from a position of power and privilege. Those in a position of power and privilege are not likely to experience sexual, racial, caste or class-based discrimination unlike groups which have borne the brunt of multiple discriminations. Dalit women’s life narratives, according to this understanding, would have an enhanced historical value, since they are narrated from a perspective of deprivilege.

The Dalit women’s movement has questioned the privileging of upper-caste women’s narratives and priorities and the scant attention paid to Dalit women’s historiography or narratives in India (Aneja, 2019, p. 5; Arya & Rathore, 2020, Introduction). Intersectional scholarship, engaging with vectors of both caste and gender, however, has directed attention to Dalit histories, narratives and autobiographies (Rege, 2006). Yet one is conscious of the limitations of this research given the large numbers of Dalit women and rural Dalit women who live out their lives, do so outside the pale of literacy. To read Dalit autobiographies and life writings therefore, from the vantage point of the outsider, is to

engage in a constant act of translation, an extension of the imagination, as it were.

In the case of Dalit life writings, as in the case of many subordinated groups, we witness a process of self-fashioning and self-narration where the self subsumes into itself concerns that cause it to expand into an account of the collective struggles of a group. These writings pinpoint issues that resonate and chime in with collective experiences of discrimination. This expansion of the circle of sympathy and enlargement of concerns is a distinctive feature of Dalit women's life writings. It is this reaching out that marks women's and life writings of subordinated and oppressed groups, as opposed to a relatively more enclosed, self-referential, autonomous self.

The Dalit writer's job, in one sense, becomes that of translation, beyond the linguistic domain or the domain of language. He/she undertakes the task of translating horrors unspeakable into the matrix of acceptable speech and narrative. He /she aims to foreground the ethics—or lack of it—the injustice and depredations faced by the Dalit. The task of writing in this context becomes one of ethical responsibility borne by the author towards the community, of bearing witness to their oppressions that the author has to carry out. The task of writing therefore comes with its share of political responsibility for the Dalit author, a task which lays certain cultural and collective expectations on the author/autobiographer. In an interview in 2018, "Mapping the Margins", Meena Kandasamy points out the falsity and spuriousness of the dictum that there ought to be a separation of the domain of art from that of politics.

According to Kandasamy, the idea that there is "art for art's sake" and art for society's sake is a false dictum, a specious distinction (p. 143). Moreover,

the person who is very committed to society will take the utmost care to use the most beautiful words, aesthetics, the loveliest form of writing, to be able to reach out to more people. I do not think that writing for . . . society makes it any less of an art or literature. I [also] don't believe that writing can exist in a vacuum; even if you say that you aren't writing for . . . society, you are making a choice—a conscious choice to distance yourself from . . . society as something about it makes you step away from it. After all, everybody is within . . . society, nobody is outside it (p. 144).

Another issue with Dalit writing has to do with the issue of linguistic translation, often from regional languages to English. The first and

obvious issue has to do with language, and the difficulty in conveying the nuances of words without elaborate explanations. For instance, to translate *Joothan* in a single word or phrase is a challenge. Sometimes the translation has a metaphoric or figurative resonance, as in the case of Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* from the word *Aaydan* which derives from Pawar's mother's occupation of weaving baskets. Most Dalit writing and Dalit life writings are translated by non-Dalit translators. In most cases the social location of the urban translator is different from the writer who maybe in a rural setting. Further as Kandasamy, the Dalit feminist writer says: "As a translator, (often) I encounter the situation in which writing about politics is not seen as literature, which leaves Dalits at a disadvantage" (p. 144). While she translated the works of the Dalit leader, Thol Thirumaavalavan, he would tell her that because of the area of his work, because he has to speak, the literature that he creates is not "the literature he got from reading books or referring to the works of scholars", but from the collective resistance of the people. The literature he creates does not have the "mood" of literature. How then, he asks, "can the work be called literary?" (p. 145).

According to Kandasamy, "the people outside the Dalit struggle do not know Dalit struggle for what it is" (p. 146). As a translator, she says that she wants to make a point, which is to illustrate "with deep humility, that the world we are living in is a completely isolated world." To demonstrate, Kandasamy cites an incident, Venmani [the Kilvenmani massacre] that would hold a complete memory and understanding for a Dalit person, but need not be so for a non-Dalit person. For a non-Dalit, and especially someone who has no link [to] or understanding of the anti-caste struggle, it is just a noun; there is no history, no anger, no story to be told about Venmani or Theni or Meenakshipuram [villages in Tamil Nadu] (p. 146). Dalit history as told by a non-Dalit and one told by a Dalit would be different, as is demonstrated by the example here (p. 147).

It is not just in the domain of memory and history that we perceive a gap. Dalit women's life writings/narratives maybe seen as eschewing the novelistic strategies of characterization, sensational plot driven stories. This is definitely a departure and deviation from many women's life-narratives which use already existing fictional forms while inscribing their experiences (Swindells, 1985). Instead, Dalit women's life narratives

chose flat statement as also the form of testimonies (Guru, 2008, p. 159). As Gopal Guru astutely points out, if one chooses to use testimonies in the sense of legal discourse, this usage does not permit a

radical reading of the stories...however, one can defend the use of testimonies if it is understood in another radical sense. The idea of testimonies is crucial to Dalit identity and subjectivity. Testimonies can be interpreted as a powerful moral medium to protest against adversaries both from within and outside (2008, p. 160).

Dalit women's testimonies could be seen as a political initiative to engage with Dalit patriarchies and also patriarchies at large. Their personal narratives are also a protest against exploitation by the state and by emerging markets (Guru, 2008). The women's autobiographies, further, are protests against the exclusion of Dalit women from their indigenous Dalit public sphere. Their protest is moreover directed at their entrapment in Dalit male writers' modes of representation. A cogent instance of such a stereotypical representation is the image of the mother who, in most writings by Indian male authors, are portrayed as self-sacrificing, patiently suffers pain and suffering, but rarely provides a blueprint for agency and change. In *The Prisons We Broke*, *The Weave of My Life*, instead are women and mothers with agency. In their resistance to certain patriarchal ideologies, these texts can be read in such a way so as to fire the canon of life-narratives. First is the direct oral quality of these writings which corrects the disproportionate stress on writing/inscribing central to modernity. Second is the focus on collective struggles rather than on the individual, third is the focus on everyday struggles to claim the "I". It could be said that life narratives are of strategic importance to oppressed groups since they became a way of naming themselves and a powerful political act.

Experiences of exploitation, humiliation and starvation are common to the life narratives under discussion. The triple exploitation of caste, class and gender resonate across the pages of both the texts and are also thematized in almost all the theoretical discussions of Dalit women's life narratives as well. Pawar highlights instances of beliefs of caste purity and pollution, resulting in discriminatory practices. Both *The Weave of My Life* and *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble recount that Dalits were expected to dispose of dead animals. A specific religious ritual even involved inflicting a wound upon a Mahar man and his wife who were to go around the village to beg for aid. Women in these communities had

to work from 4 am till late into the night, planting paddy in the fields till their backs became like bows (described by Pawar), fetching water from the wells repeatedly, after their domestic chores. While their men would leisurely smoke or drink after coming home, the women were expected to massage the heads and feet of their husbands after the children went to sleep, and behave as if they were deaf and dumb creatures (so that they did not provoke their husbands). The gendered nature of manual labour is here foregrounded, highlighting the double burden of women reeling under the weight of capitalism and patriarchy, caste and gender.

Sharmila Rege in her book *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Selected Dalit Women's Testimonios* has asserted that Dalit life writings are one of the most direct ways of countering the silence and misrepresentation of the community. She observes that Dalit life narratives are distinct from traditional autobiography because in them the individual self "seeks affirmation in the collective mode" which is why she uses the term testimonio (Rege, 2006, pp. 13-14). The term 'testimonio' comes from the Spanish word meaning testimony, although testimonio is not concerned with legal testimony but is a literary genre, popular in Latin America. She asserts that Dalit life narratives violate the parameters set by bourgeois autobiography and create testimonies of caste-based oppression anti-caste struggles and resistance (p. 14). These testimonios serve as a protest against their exploitation by the state, the market, social and Dalit patriarchies and religion. What these life writings often testify to is the amazing resilience of the human spirit and the capacity of Dalit women to act as agents of change. Another point that emerges time and again is the spirit of collectivity and the collective action of women, within the Ambedkarite movement, led by the eminent Dalit jurist and scholar. The enormous impact of Ambedkar's leadership is particularly evident among the women's autobiographies from Maharashtra, *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble and *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar.

Baby Kamble's life narrative, *The Prisons We Broke* was published in 1982 in serialized form in Marathi before being published as a book in 1986. It has been acknowledged as the first autobiography by a Dalit woman, written in Marathi and in any Indian language. In an interview with the translator of her book, Maya Pandit, she recounts that her book had been written 20 years before it got published, and the long waiting or incubation period is indicative of the self-doubt, self-censorship that

Kamble went through in writing it.

Often unschooled and illiterate themselves or first generation learners, Dalit life-writings are not easily assimilated into the theoretical and epistemological paradigms of life writing studies, which is still largely provided by an Eurocentric or North American model (though increasingly challenged) in this field. Moreover, as compared to male writers who generally focus on class and caste inequalities, Dalit women writers offer a gendered perspective of their specific socio-cultural situation of women who are subjected to exploitation on the triple axes of gender, class and caste.

Instead of valorising the individual, Dalit life writings especially by women stress the aspect of social documentation and the inscription of experiences of collective oppression and marginalization. As such, they challenge the theoretical assumptions of Western life-writing studies, where the idea of the individual is a foundational one. The life-writings of Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble not only subvert the generic notions and expectations of autobiographies, they also serve to fracture the nation-space which was built upon the idea of upper class-caste heteronormative identities.

Experiences of gender and of caste oppression and of labour exploitation form the warp and weft of many Dalit women's autobiographies. Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* is a powerful personal narrative which also relates the story of Pawar's community. From detailing the hardships of Dalit women which were imprinted on her memory to her own childhood and adolescence, marriage and motherhood, oppression and emancipation, the book provides a rich textured narrative of Pawar's life even as it details the life of the community around her.

So what are the pedagogic implications of these life narratives? As social science texts, they are inter and multidisciplinary. As mentioned above, they offer a kind of 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) and a detailed ethnography. For the non-Dalit teacher teaching a Dalit text in a heterogeneous classroom, it is invitation to not just straddle but to redefine boundaries, to read otherness through a lens of empathy and understanding. For the Dalit teacher, the pedagogic act is an act of bearing witness, in fact, doubly so. To understand the investment of the person teaching Dalit literature or life writing, Weber's concept of 'verstehen' could be useful as it implies an understanding of the lives of

people from their particular and specific perspective. Dalit literature and life writings, with its deviations from the 'literary' and the 'aesthetic' norms of previous writing, its generic resistance vis a vis accepted literary norms and styles which interrogate the 'individualistic' models of life writing, could offer opportunities to understand other modes of culture, cultural diversity, the importance of learning about affect, sympathy and compassion. It is an invitation to read through an act of imaginative extension where we read selves occupying the place of the other. It is a crossing over, a constant negotiation between two worlds. The reader reading Dalit life writings is called upon to bear witness, historically and sociologically.

Pedagogically speaking, Dalit literature could provide one of the perspectives to fire not only the 'canon' of Indian literature but also Social Science and Humanities education. It could be a powerful tool to prise open social structures complicit with other power structures. Thus, as Rege mentions that 'caste' in the Social Sciences/Sociology in the twentieth century classroom was treated as an axis that was part of the rural and traditional ways of life which would wither away with the advent of modernity and urbanization. As we know, that has not happened, rather caste has seeped into every aspect of our lives, into identities, subjectivities and identity politics.

As Marlene Kadar points out, the potential of life writings to cross genre-boundaries and disciplines, in her essay "Whose Life is it Anyway?" is propelled 'by a philosophical and linguistic imperative that results in destabilizing genres, blending them, creating new genres and derailing the once-respected 'objective' speaker or narrator' (Chansky & Hipchen, 2016, p. 89). The result is that life writing is "the playground" for new relationships both within and without the text, and further, it is the site of "new language and new grammars" (p. 89).

This paper is part of an effort to understand and to mine the immense potential of life-narratives, in a literary, socio-cultural, pedagogical and psychological context—issues that could be flagged as knowledge-based or epistemological, and even therapeutic or psychological concerns. This is especially important in a world bedevilled by known and unknown threats, an experiential reality where we are struggling to survive on a daily basis. Unless we learn to put an end to discrimination, exclusions and discover/invent new technologies of the self, which chime harmoniously with the natural and social environment, the human race

would be-irrespective of race, class, caste, gender-in peril.

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Meenakshi Malhotra is Associate Professor in English at Hansraj College, University of Delhi. She has edited two books on Women and Life Writing, Representing the Self and Claiming the I, in addition to numerous published articles on gender and/in literature and feminist theory.

meenakshi.chat@gmail.com