

Mapping Dalit Feminism

Towards an Intersectional Standpoint

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Foreword by J. Devika



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2

Being a 'Dalit Woman'

I need a language
Still afloat in the womb
Which no one has spoken so far
Which is not conveyed through signs and gestures.
It will be open and honourable,
Not hiding in my torn underclothes.
It will contain a thousand words
Which won't stab you in the back
As you pass by.¹

These lines are from a poem titled, 'Infant Language', by Sukirtharani, which opens onto the core framework of this chapter, identity. It represents the poet's quest for an 'infant language' hitherto unspoken. The pursuit for a new language is a recurrent method approached by writers and scholars of non-mainstream literatures. While Cixous has popularized the concept of 'l'écriture féminine' in women's writing in the West,² Marathi dalit writers like Namdeo Dhasal have used slang as a powerful tool to voice their rage and create awareness and discomfort among the readers about caste.³ What makes dalit women writers'

search for a new 'language' different from that of feminists and dalit writers is their expression of their experiences of oppression simultaneously by caste and gender. The poem quoted above is part of *Wild Words*, a collection specifically catering to challenge 'the traditional values prescribed for the 'Good' Tamil woman and instead highlights 'the opposite virtues of fearlessness, outspokenness and a ceaseless questioning of prescribed rules.'⁴ Language, therefore, becomes the mode to challenge normative casteist sexism and unearths voices hitherto hidden or ignored. As such, in this poem, 'Infant Language,' language is used as a metaphor to articulate the 'self.' In this case, a specific 'dalit woman self'.

The 'self' represented in the poem marks the poet's transition from a scared dalit woman 'hiding in my torn underclothes' to a resistant speaker whose voice is 'open and honourable'. Her 'torn underclothes' indicate violent rape; a common occurrence for dalit women who are routinely gang raped due to the brahmanical assumption of dalit women being impure, lustful and sexually available for use. The poet, however, challenges this pre-given stigma and denies to be identified only by her 'torn underclothes'. She asserts that her letters of her 'alphabet', 'sticky with blood', are intended to scare those who oppressed her. In the process, it is not only the poet's own narrative that is framed through an 'infant language', but also the formulations of specific caste and gender oppression on dalit women and dalit women's assertion of their own voice. The infant language challenges innocence that is predominantly associated with infancy and shows how the poet's own innocence is marred by her 'torn underclothes'. The poem, therefore, foregrounds the caste and gender intersection as having specific impact on dalit women's oppression. It is this specificity that goes in the making of a dalit woman's identity.

As mentioned earlier, Dalit Feminism proclaims its difference from mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics by recognizing caste and gender as intersectional, and thereby identifying its constituency, that is, 'dalit woman', as different from 'woman'

and 'dalit' as defined by mainstream feminism and Dalit Politics respectively. What then is the identity of 'dalit woman' as conceived by Dalit Feminism? The answer to this question is explored through an examination of how dalit women's 'selfhood,' understood through the self-representations of their intersectional identity, challenges the single-axis identity proclaimed by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics. This exploration is made by foregrounding the issues that emerge through this intersectional understanding of caste and gender: domesticity and sexuality, education, and emancipation, which, however, are not specific only to the self-articulations by dalit women. They also inform and formulate the identities constructed by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics. Since this mapping is intended to highlight Dalit Feminism's conceptualization of caste and gender in contradistinction to mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics, I opt for a comparative study to see how these issues are represented in all three theorizations.

To focus on the notion of selfhood and identity, I incorporate autobiographies for textual analysis. Associated with articulations of the self, the genre autobiography is used by various marginal groups as a powerful tool to make visible the identities of those who are repressed or unheard by/in mainstream society and literature. Expressing these voices thus entails not only the recovery and reclamation of hitherto suppressed identities, but also an intervention into dominant representations and notions of the self. This oppositional stance is visible in autobiographies canonised by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics that challenge patriarchy and Brahmanism respectively. However, their construction of single-axis identities for 'woman' and 'dalit' largely erases dalit women. Dalit women's autobiographies highlight the specificity of caste and gender-based intersectional oppression while also focusing on the dual forms of patriarchies: brahmanical and dalit. How do dalit women construct their identities in ways that are different from 'Indian women' and 'dalit'? I explore what

kind of issues emerge through dalit women's autobiographies that are distinct.

Let me give a brief outline of 'selfhood' as constructed through autobiographies and elucidate oppositional approaches propounded through autobiographies canonised by Western Feminism and Dalit Politics. I invoke black feminist theorizing of black women's autobiographies to substantiate how intersectional identity poses a challenge to 'woman' and 'black' as conceptualized by White Feminism and Dalit Politics respectively. I then analyse autobiographies canonised by mainstream Indian Feminism, Dalit Politics, and Dalit Feminism to show the different constructions of 'woman', 'dalit' and 'dalit woman' in terms of the relationship between self and society. This exploration is made by foregrounding the issues that emerge through this intersectional understanding of caste and gender: domesticity and sexuality, education and emancipation. These issues are not specific only to the self-articulations by dalit women—they also inform and formulate the identities constructed by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics. Since Dalit Feminism propounds its politics in contradistinction to mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics, it often revisits and revises the events and issues raised by the latter two. In such situations, we may find several overlaps in the concerns expressed by mainstream Indian Feminism, Dalit Politics and Dalit Feminism. I especially draw upon these overlaps because this mapping is intended to highlight how the 'dalit woman' that dalit women's autobiographies create is different from the 'woman' and the 'dalit' constituted by the earlier canonised autobiographies. Thus I disentangle the problematics of caste and gender intersection in the creation of dalit woman's identity as opposed to the predominant view of their exclusivity. I aim to explore the following questions: what kinds of knowledge emerge from all three positions of mainstream Indian Feminism, Dalit Politics and Dalit Feminism? How does the intersectional lens of caste and gender bring about a new/different understanding

of the same issues? What kinds of 'self' ('woman', 'dalit' and 'dalit woman') do we see emerging from this reading of autobiographies?

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE NOTION OF SELFHOOD

The importance of autobiography in representing the identity of the narrator lies in the authorial injunction. Defining autobiography as a 'retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality', Philippe Lejeune postulates that

by bringing up the problem of the *author*, autobiography brings to light phenomena that fiction leaves in doubt: in particular the fact that there can be identity of the narrator and the principal character in the case of narration 'in the third person'. This identity, no longer being established within the text by the use of 'I' is established indirectly, but without any ambiguity, by the double equation: author = narrator, and author = character, from which it is deduced that narrator=character even if the narrator remains implicit.⁵

The major contentions of autobiographies written by male authors from the dominant sections of society are the establishment of the individual 'self' and its authenticity. In a specified cultural realm, autobiography thus aims to present the individual self. In a feminist critique of the postulation on autobiography as a model of separate and unique selfhood, Susan Stanford Friedman argues, 'First, the emphasis on individualism does not take into account the importance of group identity for women and minorities. Second, the emphasis on separateness ignores the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity.'⁶ The idea of selfhood in Western men's autobiographies does not take into account the role of collective identities propounded by feminists and minorities, and ignores the structural differences

that construct and shape identities based on gender, race, and other minority positions. Anglo-American women's autobiographies celebrate femalehood as a challenge to the predominance of masculinity. As a corollary of such feminist theorization, women's autobiographies deal with issues that specifically concern women. Due to their focus on 'women's lives' women's autobiographies have been seen as rich sites exploring negotiations and resistances that go in the making of the female self.⁷

Women's autobiographies, then, emerge as a resistance to the male 'self' which was normative in autobiographical articulation. Women autobiographers negotiate with that normative selfhood through their own self-constitution by emphasizing women's issues, by highlighting relationality and thereby claiming agency. Women's autobiographies emphasize the personal and the relational in contrast to the individualized 'self' of men's autobiographies. Postulating the importance of women's autobiographies in feminist constructions of subjectivity, Smith and Watson write:

Processes of subject formation and agency occupy theorists of narrative and, indeed, of culture as never before. If feminism has revolutionized literary and social theory, the texts and theory of women's autobiography have been pivotal for revising our concepts of women's life issues—growing up female, coming to voice, affiliation, sexuality and textuality, the life cycle. Crucially, the writing and theorizing of women's lives has often occurred in texts that place an emphasis on collective processes while questioning the sovereignty and universality of the solitary self.⁸

Two things that become important in feminist theorization of women's autobiographies are firstly, the emphasis on the notions of women's issues, and secondly, emphasis on relationality. The concept of relationality is propounded by Nancy Chodorow in her reformulation of the category 'woman' by invoking sexual difference.⁹ Chodorow makes a valuable contribution by analysing

'basic sex difference in personality' among boys and girls, and pointing out that 'feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does.... [In other words] women are less individuated than men and have more flexible ego boundaries'.¹⁰ Feminine experiential self therefore is rooted in relationality as opposed to that of the male who is alienated. Self-construction through autobiographical narratives becomes a way to challenge prescribed normative identities. For marginalized groups such as women, autobiographical narratives which claim to *create* the self, become the tools for fashioning their identity. Harlene Anderson defines self-agency as 'the ability to behave, feel, think, and *choose* in a way that is liberating'.¹¹ The idea of autobiography as liberating self-creation, therefore, is linked to both a non-normative notion of selfhood (the relational idea) and the emphasis on women's issues as distinct and worthy of attention.

This notion of articulation being linked to liberating selfhood was the reason why autobiographical narratives flourished in Black Politics as well. While a challenge to patriarchy underpins women's autobiographies, the experience of racial discrimination informs autobiographies by black writers. According to Paul Gilroy, these autobiographies 'express in the most powerful way a tradition of writing in which autobiography becomes an act or process of simultaneous self-creation and self-emancipation'.¹² Kenneth Mostern defines autobiography as a 'process' which enables 'an articulation based on determinate memory and recall of experience via the lens of traumatically constrained ideology, to describe the continuing racialization of politics'.¹³ Autobiographies by black writers, as Mostern elaborates, showcase 'personal stories as a means of theorising their political positions'.¹⁴ Being reflective of their politics, the subjects of their autobiographies do not conform to the idea of an alienated 'self' (as claimed by white male autobiographers), being rooted instead in the community.¹⁵ To quote from Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in black autobiographies 'the

narrated, descriptive “eye” was put into service as a literary form to posit both the individual “I” of the black author as well as the collective “I” of the race’.¹⁶

Black feminists, however, have questioned both ‘woman’ and ‘black’ as constituted in autobiographies by white women and black writers. Their emphasis on the relationality and the collective involves its own homogenization and erasure. These autobiographies create a sense of selfhood that is homogeneous, and as such, they create their own normativity that excludes the specificity of black woman’s sense of selfhood.

To counter the alienation, otherization and invisibilization of women of colour, black feminists turn to narratives by women of colour as their starting point. Barbara Smith expresses her anxiety at finding existing theories by feminism and anti-racism inadequate to understand black women’s writing ‘which goes beyond anything that either black men or white women experience and tell about in their writing’.¹⁷ Hence, Smith embarks on a mission to formulate a black feminist criticism that would be able to properly identify and substantiate intersectional selfhood. She writes, ‘A black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of black women writers is an absolute necessity.’¹⁸ According to Smith, writings by black women narrating their lives directly contribute in constructing a ‘viable, autonomous black feminist movement’ which in turn redefines and revises the goals and strategies of the feminist and anti-racist movements.¹⁹

Similarly, in the case of dalit women’s autobiographies, intersectionality of caste and gender and the notion of dual patriarchies provide a different knowledge about dalit women. This is evident through a comparative exploration of how selfhood gets articulated differently in autobiographies canonised by mainstream Indian Feminism, Dalit Politics and Dalit Feminism.

CONSTRUCTING THE 'WOMAN'

In Anglo-American feminist theorization, women's autobiographies are seen as an enabling mode that revises the notions about what are the issues that women face, and emphasizes the collective which cannot be subsumed within the individual which is most often male. Women's autobiographies have also been read as rich sites exploring negotiations and resistances that go in the making of identity for the self. The autobiographical exploration of identity as socially constructed foregrounds two images of women: a dominant image dictated for women to follow, and an alternative image constructed by women themselves. As Sheila Rowbotham points out,

But always we were split in two, straddling silence, not sure where we would begin to find ourselves or one another. From this division, our material dislocation, came the experience of one part of ourselves as strange, foreign and cut off from the other which we encountered as tongue-tied paralysis about our own identity. We were never all together in one place, were always in transit, immigrants into alien territory.... The manner in which we knew ourselves was at variance with ourselves as an historical being-woman.²⁰

This contradiction creates a division amongst 'the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription'.²¹ Rowbotham, however, finds in this duality a potential for a 'new consciousness' that allows negotiation and resistance to take place. Similar to Du Bois' conceptualization of 'double consciousness' for blacks living in dominant white culture, Rowbotham's understanding of the invisibility and silencing of women in patriarchal society throws light on the alienation of marginalized identities. This awareness of alienation urges the autobiographical narratives from the margins to establish a self that is fraught with the duality of identity and that which claims agency through negotiation and/or resistance.

Exploring the ways in which the identity of 'woman' is constructed and contested, I look at autobiographies canonised by mainstream Indian Feminism. The bifurcation of identity, in gendered terms, arose in India during the colonial period with the social reformist agenda of fashioning the 'new woman' who would become the role model of modern, independent, non-Western, nationalist India. The 'order of gender', as J. Devika puts it, was projected to be an ideal social ordering maintained through clear demarcations between gender roles. Men were posited in the external realm of the public, political, economic, and intellectual, and women were supposed to 'naturally assume' the role of an efficient homemakers and true 'partners' of the men.²² In order to maintain this 'natural' binary, women's education aimed to develop a modern individual who would be able to conform to the 'idealized modern gendered subjectivities'. The modern women, 'culled out of the traditional order' and created to be 'free from bondage to tradition', were to exist 'as the guardian[s] of the home and hearth ... in a relation of complementarity with Man'.²³

The nineteenth century becomes an interesting starting point to examine the constitution of 'woman' because on the one hand tracts were being written dictating modes of behaviour for young and educated women, and on the other hand there was an upsurge of women writers narrating their life histories. The juxtaposition of the 'official construction of femininity' (defined in terms of chastity, obedience, and docility), with the personal narratives of women, presents more than one construction of femininity.²⁴ The notion of constructed identity (as opposed to fixed, given identity) shows that 'woman' is not a fixed category. A reading of women's autobiographies belonging to different times would throw light not only on the dominant constructions of 'woman' from the nineteenth century but also on the strategies of self-fashioning and self-reconstruction by these women.

For this purpose, the autobiographies that I have chosen are Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* (My Life) (1876) and Kamala Das's

My Story (1977) which are considered exemplary texts in the history of Indian Feminism. The question that drives Ranjana Harish to read women's autobiographies is 'how did they differ from men, especially in their autobiographical writing?'²⁵ Autobiographies of women, therefore, have been seen in contrast to that of men and have reformulated the 'I' as relational and personal/domestic. Women's autobiographies in India have significantly contributed in creating a feminist insight into notions of patriarchy, and the contours of femininity/masculinity, from the perspective of women. Their personal narratives reflect an emergence of political consciousness about the systemic disadvantages experienced in lived realities, thereby creating a scope to seek social justice. My reading goes beyond the examination of dominant representations of 'woman' and the subsequent challenges put forth by the women autobiographers, and examines the identities that get subsumed or silenced within this overarching, homogenized categorization. Identifying the identity 'woman' as 'mutable' and rooted in difference, I urge a continual revising of the Indian feminist discourses of selfhood and conceptualization of its constituency, that is, 'woman'.

Amar Jiban (1876)

Written at the moment of the burgeoning nationalist reconstruction of the 'new woman,' Rassundari Devi's autobiography, *Amar Jiban*, was lauded by nineteenth-century male writers and critics for staying within the prescribed boundaries of the 'private' and for representing the concerns about education that went into the making of a *bhadramahila* (gentlewoman). In the preface to *Amar Jiban* Jyotirindranath Tagore validates the book by saying that 'even though it is written by a woman, it is worth reading'. In the introduction, Dinesh Chandra Sen further corroborates this statement by writing: 'This autobiography should not be ignored as a personal narrative. It is an authentic portrait of an old

Hindu woman. Through her simple writing, she presents a picture of the society. *Amar Jiban* is not just about Rassaundari; it is the story of all Hindu women.²⁶ Rassundari is praised for being a true modern Hindu woman defined in terms of her qualities as a homemaker, strong religiosity, and interest in education.

The autobiography, therefore, negotiates with the nationalist construction of 'woman'. Partha Chatterjee postulates, these nineteenth-century autobiographies focused on 'the facts of social history and the development of new cultural norms for the collective life of the nation, rather than the exploration of individuality and the inner workings of the personality'.²⁷ Inscribing the 'individual' within the narrative of the nation became an act of reclamation of citizenship that was denied by the colonial regime. Such reclamation entailed a restructuring of the world by dividing it into the outer material world and the inner spiritual world. The former represented the colonial rule and the latter 'became the site for the development of an indigenous identity through the hegemonic discourse of nationalism'.²⁸ Mathur goes on to explain that since 'this nationalist ideology was inscribed primarily on the body of the woman, who was deliberately re-fashioned during this period to become the embodiment of an inviolable "Indian" identity, the notion of subjectivity in women's autobiography was tied, even more so than in the men's, to the life of the nation'.²⁹ The over-determining presence of the nationalist question in Indian women's life histories, however, did not always ascertain an unquestioned acceptance of patriarchal nationalisms. As Vina Mazumdar points out, although the nineteenth-century women's autobiographies were seen to be representing the social condition of its times where women were the 'observers' rather than participants in social change, their writings, in fact, urged the readers 'for a fresh look at the social ideology and gender relations of "an unequal stratified society"'.³⁰ Nineteenth-century women's autobiographies are analysed from a feminist point of

view as representing an image of 'woman' that is different from the dominant representations.

Amar Jiban has been read by feminists as foregrounding women's issues such as marriage and education from a woman's perspective. Malavika Karlekar explores the agential subjectivity as constructed through Rassundari Devi's re-defining of *antahpur* or the inner world.³¹ *Antahpur*, or the secluded domestic realm, was a vital location which helped sustain the male world and also organized a rigid, gendered internal hierarchy. Karlekar writes, 'A primary role of the *antahpur vis-à-vis* the man's world was one of ensuring ritual purity for the family. It included strict adherence to rules of commensality, provided physical sustenance as well as sexual services.'³² She further mentions that the nineteenth-century '*antahpur* was symbolic of the physical and emotional experiences of its members. It was the world of the *aturghar* or lying-in room, rituals or *bratas*, an endless repertoire of food items being prepared according to specific rules. An in-marrying woman's identity was shaped and organized by the norms of the *antahpur* dictated usually by senior female affines.'³³ Rassundari Devi's marriage at the age of twelve brought her directly into the realm of the *antahpur* which was so far alien to her in contrast to her mother's house. Although Rassundari writes about her mother-in-law in loving words,³⁴ she likens her married life to being in a prison: 'People imprison birds for their own delight. My condition is the same. I was also locked within the cage for the rest of my life.'³⁵ According to Karlekar, Rassundari Devi defies the dictations of *antahpur* in two ways: by identifying it as a restrictive space and through her quest for God (whom she calls *Parameshwar*) that leads her to do the activities prohibited to women, namely, reading and writing.

In such troublesome conditions, the only thing that keeps her going is her undaunted faith in *Parameshwar* and her desire to learn how to read and write. Tanika Sarkar, in her reading

of *Amar Jiban*, argues that the invocation of God highlights 'the social making' of gender roles that define boundaries for women; Rassundari refers to the social order as a part of God's design, 'but she does, nonetheless, have a clear sense of the social making of it'.³⁶ Underlying Rassundari's repeated claim that it is God who is shaping her destiny, is her awareness that all the duties that are assigned to women are social mandates. Sarkar adds, 'On certain issues, [Rassundari] speaks in a declamatory voice, where she describes the painful consequences of social regulations. She, clearly, is addressing a modern readership here which is already debating these matters: on women's education, about the restrictions of old times, about the relentless pressure of domestic labour, the problems of motherhood.'³⁷ According to Sarkar, therefore, Rassundari's autobiography reflects acute consciousness about the Indian woman as a patriarchal construct. Her experience is not an automatic process; it is a political understanding arrived at through lifelong struggle. It is this consciousness that makes her realize that men and women occupy differing and skewed positions in society and within the house.³⁸

Amar Jiban also challenges the idea of the individual created in male autobiographies by invoking the autobiographical subject in relational terms. In *Amar Jiban*, Rassundari's life revolves around the people in her family. This corresponds to Chodorow's idea that while men are encouraged to express themselves as individuals, independent from familial ties, women grow up within families, learning to relate themselves to different communities. According to Meena Sodhi, 'A woman's autobiography generally focuses on the various relationships like those with her parents, her siblings and later with her spouse, children and her mother-in-law. This last is a typical characteristic of an Indian woman autobiographer.... But a man's autobiography is mainly concerned with his success story, his achievements in his life, and very rarely does he give a vivid account of his wife and children.'³⁹

What seems to dominate the feminist readings of *Amar Jiban* is the gendered re-interpretation of 'woman' specifically in the spheres of domesticity, marriage and education. Rassundari is seen to portray an alternative identity of 'woman' who is not a mute observer but has the ability to critically understand women's oppression and defy the norms by learning to read and write. Although the act of writing an autobiography brings Rassundari's private life out in the public, she does not necessarily challenge the public/private dichotomy. Karlekar claims that Rassundari's agency comes when she converts the antahpur, a realm where gender hierarchies are at play, into a location to negotiate with the outer world. Rassundari however does not step out of the antahpur. Her resistance remains within the kitchen where she hides the leaves of *Chaitanya Bhagwat*. In this way, the negotiatory identity of 'woman', that Rassundari creates, retains the dictations of gender. This becomes visible through her invocation of God which serves a dual purpose: it validates her thirst for knowledge and retains the boundaries within which she seeks knowledge. Despite her critique of patriarchal regulations for women, Rassundari retains the gender hierarchy within her family. She repeatedly mentions that although her venture into education began as a solo journey, the ultimate success came with the guidance of her sons. She in fact erases the 'public' and 'material' aspects to education by arguing that knowledge is not just about earning money, it is about exploration of the inner being.⁴⁰ In this way, she domesticizes education.

Amar Jiban problematizes the universalized images of pre-constructed and re-constructed 'woman' strictly defined in terms of modern nationalized ideologies. The autobiography, however, depicts the 'woman' as representing a single group of women in India. The ideologies of chastity, purity and obedience, that *Amar Jiban* enforces, are specific to the upper-caste and upper-class families that Rassundari belonged to.⁴¹ Sumanta Banerjee

points out how the central focus on women in the antahpur (which he calls *andarmahal*) hides the vast majority of working women: 'either self-employed [women] like *naṭṭenis*, sweepers, owners of stalls selling vegetables or fish, street singers and dancers, maid-servants, or women employed by mercantile firms dealing in seed produce, mustard, linseed, etc.'⁴² What gets erased in Rassundari's identification of dominant representation of 'woman' and her self-construction of the same is the difference among women based on class and caste.⁴³ Rassundari belongs to an upper-caste upper-class landlord family who enjoys class privilege (in the sense that she does not need to provide economically for her family). She mentions that the possibility of women going out for work and earn money was considered a 'shame' on the entire family.⁴⁴ In fact, the binaries of internal/external, home/world depended on marking the former as the 'spiritual' in which the 'new women' resided as opposed to the latter 'material' world of men. The prevalence of 'ideal womanhood' as equated to restricted domesticity, therefore, naturally devalued the lower-class lower-caste women, who participated in work outside their house, as 'impure' and 'inferior.' Partha Chatterjee writes,

The 'new' woman was quite the reverse of the 'common' woman who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males.... It was precisely this degenerate condition of women which nationalism claimed it would reform, and it was through these contrasts that the new woman of nationalist ideology was accorded a status of cultural superiority to the westernized women of the wealthy parvenu families spawned by the colonial connection as well as the common women of the lower classes.⁴⁵

Although *Amar Jiban* recognizes the restriction on women from going out to work as being patriarchal, the text does not question or challenge it. Moreover, *Amar Jiban* completely silences the

maids in Rassundari's house who are merely mentioned in terms of the number of workers in the house.⁴⁶ Such erasure of lower-class lower-caste women highlights that the 'woman' that *Amar Jiban* constructs is implicitly an upper-caste upper-class woman.

My Story (1977)

Kamala Das's *My Story* remains a stalwart in Indian feminist literature for providing a new representation of the 'woman' quite different from its nineteenth-century predecessor. In the mainstream male-dominated literary circles, Kamala Das's autobiography was deemed unfit since, unlike the works of well-known Indian male autobiographers, it is seen to delve too much into the realm of the personal. In a review published in *World Literature Today*, E. V. Ramakrishna maintains,

My Story describes a life of frolicking in sex... Sincerity, valuable though it is in itself, can enrich an autobiography only if it has a social and cultural frame of reference. The autobiographies of Andre Malraux, Arthur Koestler, Simone de Beauvoir and Nirad C. Chowdhuri have validity beyond that of mere sincerity because they identify themselves with ideas which are beyond the merely personal. Kamala Das studies her life in relation to itself. She has no sense of anything real beyond her own ego.⁴⁷

Interestingly, these alleged limitations of this autobiography highlight the much ignored realms of the personal and the body which constitute two dominant strands in Indian Feminism. *My Story* came out at a time when women's social reformation had already taken place under the rubric of nationalism and the modernized form of gender was suited to fit newly emerging institutions such as the modern family. In this modern avatar, the ideal woman, as Devika argues, was supposed to be an amalgamation of 'domestic woman' and 'aesthetic woman'. Devika writes,

While the former was the provider of progeny, the manager of material and the guardian of souls in the modern home, the aesthetic woman had a function which was almost in antipathy to this. The aesthetic woman was the provider of pleasure, she who cemented modern conjugality through ensuring pleasure.⁴⁸

In *My Story*, Das mentions this ideal as she notes how her husband expected her to effortlessly discuss and understand Oscar Wilde and Aldous Huxley and be ready to 'bare [her] breasts' when he demanded.⁴⁹ In the autobiography, the balance between the two kinds of women is best maintained by the wife of her grand-uncle who listened to her husband's mockery without any qualm all through the day, thereby presenting the image of a perfect docile wife, and at night, 'enslaved him with her voluptuous body'.⁵⁰ Das writes,

I have heard my grand-uncle tell his wife that she was the most empty-headed woman he had known. She used to laugh melodiously at such comments. At night she enslaved him with her voluptuous body. So she could well afford to humour him in the day. Each night she came to our house accompanied by her maids and a lantern, looking like a bride. And, she walked up the steep staircase of the gatehouse to meet her famous husband in their lush bedroom, kept fragrant with incense and jasmine garlands...⁵¹

In her, we see the perfect combination of a wife and a whore. In the morning, she listens to her husband's mockery without any qualm, thereby presenting the image of a perfect docile wife, and at night she dresses up like an entertainer, but only to please the husband. By remaining within the boundaries of marriage and monogamy, the duality of the wife's character is thus legitimized. *My Story* thus underscores the influence of patriarchy that goes into the making of this 'ideal woman'.

In her own self-construction Kamala Das questions the thin line between 'aesthetic' and 'erotic' through the perpetual spilling over of the two. Here we see the supposed 'aesthetic woman' revolting

by bringing in 'the body—marginalized and de-eroticized in dominant reformist discourse—into her revision of the womanly'.⁵² Devika adds, 'In her open admission of her love for "female frivolity", in her insistence on the pleasures of beautifying the (admittedly ephemeral) body, the aesthetic woman not only cuts loose, but also positions herself against domestic woman.'⁵³ Firstly, by writing, Das deliberately puts herself out in the public sphere. Autobiographical writing by a woman becomes subversive of both social norms and rules of the genre by displaying the 'personal' to an 'impersonal public'.⁵⁴ Linda Anderson theorizes this aspect of women's autobiographical discourse in the following manner: 'It is necessary to take into account the fact that the woman who attempts to write herself is engaged by the very nature of that activity itself in rewriting the stories that already exist about her since by seeking to publicize herself she is violating an important cultural construction of her femininity as passive or hidden.'⁵⁵ Secondly, in *My Story*, women's roles as reproducers and 'vessels of culture'⁵⁶ are challenged by expressions of the bodily desires that break the norms of legitimacy, marriage and heterosexuality. The aesthetic female body loved, caressed, and kissed by a girl in the night rain, is contrasted to the 'extreme brutality' of the husband on the wedding night which left the rape unsuccessful but bruised her for life.⁵⁷ In a society where sexual union within marriage is considered consensual duty especially on the part of the wife, the possibility of rape remains ignored. By showing the homosexual union as more fulfilling than the heterosexual one, Das not only emphasizes the distinction between love and sex, she also challenges the patriarchal assumption that sexual union within marriage is always a consensual duty. *My Story* presents sexuality as a 'political institution'⁵⁸ by 'addressing sexual relations, their spheres of legitimacy and illegitimacy, through the institutions and practices, as well as the discourses and forms of representation, that have long been producing, framing, distributing and controlling the subject of "sex".'⁵⁹ The 'self' that

My Story represents is one that breaks the boundaries of body and sexuality prescribed by patriarchy.⁶⁰

Though it remains, like *Amar Jiban*, within the sphere of the domestic, *My Story* emphasizes different issues and also different systems that Indian women negotiate with: from marriage and education in *Amar Jiban* to body and sexuality in marriage in *My Story*. The interpretation of the domestic also differs in these two autobiographies. Rassundari describes the domestic as a space defined by women's confinement within marital relationships which also limits their access to education (which is seen as external to the family), while Kamala Das in *My Story* focuses on what Sen and Dhawan call, 'the family as a site of women's oppression ... [and] the ideological and social apparatus of patriarchal control, especially in the domain of sexuality and motherhood'.⁶¹ *My Story* represents a shift in feminist consciousness from women negotiating with their roles within the domestic sphere (as seen in *Amar Jiban*) to the 'present-day feminis[t] '... struggle for the achievement of women's equality, dignity and freedom of choice to control our lives and bodies within and outside the home'.⁶² Inclusion of *My Story* in this section therefore helps trace a trajectory of different constructions of 'woman' over time.

This 'self,' however, is an upper-class upper-caste woman. In the autobiography Das mentions that a kitchen maid at their ancestral house, Kunhukutty, was thrown out because she performed an abortion on herself.⁶³ For a poor single woman like Kunkukutty, abortion was probably the only way towards survival. Although Kamala Das, throughout her autobiography, is conscious of her body and craves to reclaim it, when it comes to a similar situation in the case of a lower-class and lower-caste woman, Das is quite dismissive of it as seen in the way she briefly mentions the incident only to dismiss it as a possible accident. By emphasizing the upper-class upper-caste woman, the female autobiographer deliberately ignores this difference in its construction of the selfhood of the 'woman'.

These texts chosen in this section shows that the constituency of mainstream Indian Feminism, that is, 'woman', is articulated primarily in terms of its opposition to patriarchy. In the process, these autobiographies address different issues that emerged during the times they were written and published. Thus, *Amar Jiban* foregrounds issues of marriage and education, and *My Story* focuses on the representation of 'woman' through notions of body and sexuality. In *Amar Jiban* and *My Story*, the autobiographical subjects are clearly defined in terms of their gendered experiences, constructing a female selfhood for 'woman,' which, however, remains implicitly exclusive of the working maids in the house. It is important to acknowledge that pointing out these erasures is not meant to devalue or diminish the literary, social and political importance of the autobiographies. I specifically bring out these examples to reflect on the times and places in which these women were writing often in compliance with the Hindu social order. The inclusion of these texts are intended to highlight the implicit erasure of dalit women through history.

CONSTRUCTING THE 'DALIT' IDENTITY

Autobiographical writing has also come to occupy an important position within the field of Dalit Politics. Marked as the 'literature of revolt,' dalit writers believe that writing is a part of their movement against the system of caste that perpetuates in Indian society.⁶⁴ Observing on what constitutes dalit literature, Sharankumar Limbale writes, 'Dalit writers believe that Dalit literature is a movement. They see their literature as a vehicle for their pain, sorrow, questions and problems.'⁶⁵ Dalit literature reflects their consciousness of oppression and becomes a platform to express their dissent. In fact, the term 'dalit' underlines a resistance by those who challenge the ascriptions of untouchability and formulate a new collective identity borne out of the awareness of oppression. Underlying the term is a sense of political awareness,

rejection of state created categorization, and rejection of the caste system where caste-names perform a major role in determining and perpetuating caste hierarchies. Satyanarayana and Tharu argue that dalit activists 'contested the tendency to treat caste only as an instrument of oppression (untouchability, violence and dehumanization) and recreated it as a new identity of self-assertion and pride'.⁶⁶ The shift in treating caste as 'the subjectively effective identity of a social group' rather than 'an objective structure' meant for empirical information has contributed significantly in the agential formulations of Dalit Politics.⁶⁷

In dalit autobiographies the act of speaking/writing becomes crucial in their construction of identity. For dalits, writing autobiographies and narrating stories of their own lives becomes an intervention in brahmanical control over production and dissemination of knowledge. Kancha Ilaiah declares that personal experience of the marginalized is important to understand social contexts that are different from those the powerful and powerless live in. The dalit experience provides an alternative perspective of the caste system, showing that the beautiful village portrayed by upper-caste Hindi poets is not where the dalits live. As Valmiki points out, a dalit village is muck strewn where 'the stench [is] so overpowering that one would choke within a minute'. According to Ilaiah this alternative perspective is available only because the 'day-to-day experiences of the Dalitbahujan castes ... is the only possible and indeed the most authentic way in which the deconstruction and reconstruction of history can take place'.⁶⁸ Sarah Beth maintains that the emergence of dalit autobiographical narratives functions as a counter-symbol to contest traditional conceptions and representations of dalits.⁶⁹ To challenge untouchability, dalit autobiographers reject and transform the markers and symbols that represented their untouchable state. Elaborating on the characteristics of dalit writing, Sharatchandra Muktibodh writes,

The Dalit point of view constitutes a clear diagnosis of a particular social reality and a sanguine hope for its desirable transformation. The Dalit sensibility shows a deep concern for the Dalit point of view and an outstanding work of Dalit literature would be born only when Dalit life would present itself from the Dalit point of view.⁷⁰

What dalit writers promote through their writing is a political awareness of their oppression arising from the caste system and understanding the system not as inherent or given, but as constructed by Brahmanism to maintain a power hierarchy. In Maharashtra, dalit literature gained popularity through the writings of a group of educated dalit graduates, who, inspired by Ambedkar, set up a literary body, the Siddharth Sahitya Sangh.⁷¹ Their writings marked a tremendous struggle to establish the dalit subject and find an authentic voice that emerges out of experiences of untouchability. The new generation of writers, notably Baburao Bagul and Namdeo Dhasal, 'wanted neither sympathy nor solidarity; they wanted agency'.⁷² It was a moment of creativity springing from feelings of sufferings. Dangle writes:

Dalit literature portrays the hopes and aspirations of the exploited masses. Their fight for survival, their daily problems, the insults they have to put up with, their experiences and their outlook towards all these events are portrayed in Dalit literature.⁷³

Satyanarayana and Tharu mention that Tamil dalit literature in the 1990s coincided with several significant historical and political events that shaped the perpetuation of the caste system in modern India. These events, namely, the Mandal Commission, the rise of Hindutva politics and the Kilvenmani massacre, mark 'the escalating violence on dalits in both the northern and southern regions of the state [Tamil Nadu]'.⁷⁴ Dalit literary expression has thus continued in conjunction with dalit movements in unveiling

the different ways caste oppression pervades contemporary India. In the process, along with their critique of Brahmanism, they also reveal a dalit perception of education, class, religion and culture. Dalit literature, therefore, is an important counter-narrative.

Among the texts that have attained canonical stature for highlighting caste oppression as well as the opposition to it, I will be discussing Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003), Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* (2003), and K. A. Gunasekaran's *The Scar* (2009). The dalit 'self' that these autobiographies foreground is in opposition to Brahmanism and in alliance with the dalit community. Distinguished by languages, writing styles and social settings, these autobiographies often present similar concerns about the caste system and methods of anti-caste struggle. Arising from discontents, dalit autobiographies challenge not only the caste system, but also literary representations of dalits. Thus, these autobiographies are a mouthpiece to voice resistance, and this is what makes their literature an indispensable component of their movement.

Joothan (2003)

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is one of the pioneering autobiographies in Hindi dalit literature. First published in Hindi in 1997, it was translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in 2003. As mentioned earlier, progressing parallel to dalit political movements, dalit literature, especially autobiography, has been seen as an indispensable component to reclaim a 'dalit' identity which is not victimized. *Joothan*, by narrating the lived experiences of caste discrimination and the author's emancipation, portrays a liberated dalit 'self'. As Arun Prabha Mukherjee writes in the introduction to *Joothan*, 'Dalit autobiography ... is not just a remembering of things past, but a shaping and structuring of them in such a way as to help understand one's life and the social order that shaped it, on the one hand, and to arouse a passion for change in the Dalit reader.'⁷⁵

This characteristic has been explored at length by critics of *Joothan*. By narrating the lived experiences of caste discrimination, *Joothan* is seen as bringing into light authentic representations of dalithood. According to Laura Brueck, *Joothan's* resistance is marked by its intervention in dominant literary representations of dalits in upper-caste writers such as Premchand who equated caste with class. Referring to Premchand's story, 'Kafan', Brueck observes that although the story has been highly celebrated for its critique of how institutionalized oppression leads to dehumanization, dalit writers have criticized for its lack of awareness of caste oppression. This lack, Omprakash Valmiki states, arises from 'a confusion between caste and class-related oppression'. Valmiki writes, 'The characters of Ghisu and Madhav in his story "Kafan" are Chamars, but the story does not raise any issue that is related to the problems of Chamars or Dalits. There is only a detailed depiction of their idleness and heartlessness.'⁷⁶

Sarah Beth explores the construction of identity through communal experience in *Joothan* where the 'I' in dalit autobiographies is inextricably linked to the collective. Beth writes, 'Since Dalit autobiographies are meant to be the life-story of an ordinary Dalit, to symbolically represent the experiences of every Dalit, the Dalit protagonist is established as the representative of the Dalit community and Dalit identity.'⁷⁷ Beth, however, does not perceive the overlapping of collective onto the individual as a complete loss of the individuality of the subject. She argues that Valmiki asserts his 'personal agency' through instances such as his marriage with the girl of his own choice rather than the one selected by his community. The criticisms of *Joothan* thus primarily seem to focus on reclamation and celebration of the 'dalit' identity wherein agency is gained by challenging passivity. My reading, however, explores the instances that get silenced in the autobiography.

Joothan portrays a society where dalits are treated as *joothans* or 'leftovers.' The hypocrisy of the caste system becomes visible in

an incident recounted by Valmiki. While visiting the house of his non-dalit teacher the author becomes thrilled at the rare and nice treatment by the teacher's father. He not only asks the author to sit with him, but urges him to eat food together. These gestures are unthinkable in a caste-ridden society that thrives on social practices of untouchability. The author's happiness however is short-lived once the teacher's father comes to know of his caste. 'Lifting a heavy stick from underneath the charpai, the elder hit Bhikhuram on his back.... Obscenities began to rain from the elder's mouth. His eyes were fierce and his skinny body was harbouring the devil. We had dared to eat in their dishes and sit on their charpai, a crime in his eyes.'⁷⁸ This incident unveils the discriminatory nature of a society where people are judged solely on the basis of their caste.

Valmiki's engagement with caste also takes the form of an internal critique of casteism by showing how dalits internalize such caste discrimination. He writes that during a wedding, the Churhas were given leftovers after all the guests had eaten their fill. After that 'the dirty pattals or leaf-plates were put in the Churhas' baskets, which they took home, to save the joothan sticking to them'.⁷⁹ What makes the author angry is how the leftovers were eaten with 'a lot of relish'.⁸⁰ *Joothan* thus combines the author's struggle with both external and internal enemies. The oppression by non-dalits as well as the internalization of brahmanical values which leads to voluntary subordination by dalits, both these aspects come under scrutiny in the autobiography.

The dalits however do not remain mere victims. We see how the author's father breaks the tradition and insists on educating his sons; the author himself refuses to collect animal carcasses, a profession specifically meant for the Churha caste that he belonged to; and the author asks the teacher 'How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn't an epic poet ever write a word on our lives?'⁸¹ *Joothan* thus shows a political awareness of caste oppression and rejects it by asserting a questioning, resistant self.

Valmiki's assertion of identity, however, is more individual than collective. Unlike what Beth claims, the autobiography progresses very much like that of the Western male individual. It narrates the life of the author who gradually detaches himself from the daily drudgeries of caste. Such distancing is visible through the author's rejection of practices and customs marked by caste. The first instance is when Valmiki identifies caste-based professions such as skinning carcasses of animals with stigma. He writes, 'My hands were trembling as I held the knife.... That day something broke inside me.... I felt I was drawn into the very quagmire that I had tried to escape from.'⁸² His rejection of partaking in caste-based professions and his physical distancing from his community by moving to a city is marked by a desire for class mobility. Interestingly, even though Valmiki claims that *Joothan* is a story of the dalit community, he seems to establish an emancipatory individual identity by moving away from the community. In this scenario, invocation of collective serves merely to draw examples of caste oppression.

The autobiography ends with Valmiki's reclamation of dalit identity through the retaining of his dalit surname. Such awareness arises out of the political implications of identity-based assertion. Valmiki owes it to his readings of Ambedkar. He says that his participation in dalit political and cultural movements ultimately made him realize the need to have a holistic resistance to caste system. In the final section of the autobiography Valmiki writes,

Why is my caste my only identity? Many friends hint at the loudness and arrogance of my writings.... That is, my being Dalit and arriving at a point of view according to my environment and my socio-economic situation is being arrogant. Because in their eyes, I am only an SC, the one who stands outside the door.⁸³

The belief that the author had during his youth—that with class mobility caste will be erased—vanishes when, even after getting

a high-ranking job, he faces discrimination due to his caste. His awareness, therefore, is both personal and political. It is personal experience that drives him to make political assertion. Valmiki asserts his identity by retaining his caste name as his surname. This marks a celebration of 'dalithood' and also poses a challenge to the stigma that is attached to dalits. The 'dalit' self that *Joothan* envisions is an agential self.

But even as this 'dalit' agential self recognizes and resists the caste violence experienced by the dalit community, it naturalizes the patriarchal oppression of dalit women within the house. For example, Valmiki's father fights with the upper-caste people and sends his sons to school, but no such effort is made for the daughter. Valmiki too dismisses the entire problem with one sentence: 'There was no question of sending our sister to school.'⁸⁴ This naturalizing of education as a male privilege leaves the gender hierarchy within a lower-caste family unproblematized. One incident that further reveals the naturalization of the internal oppression of dalit women by dalit men is the beating of chachi (aunt) by Valmiki's father. The widowed chachi's relationship with another relative, Shyamlal chacha (uncle), causes enormous furore in the family, making Valmiki's father shower blows on chachi out of anger. Valmiki describes how his father 'picked up a stick lying in the courtyard and struck chachi's back with it. Chachi had doubled up under his blow'.⁸⁵ Soon chachi is sent back to her house, and Shyamlal chacha is married off to another girl. The entire episode is seen by the author's family as chachi's fault as chacha goes unscathed. Interestingly, though the author is heavily critical of caste oppression, he accepts this violence by dalit men on a dalit woman without any question. The violence is simply accepted as punishment of the 'pretty' widow, chachi, who defied the norms of celibacy and had a sexual relationship with another man.⁸⁶ This acceptance reveals the existence of dalit patriarchy (reflecting an internalization of brahmanical gender norms for upper-caste women) which exacts physical retribution from the

dalit woman when she dares to step outside the prescribed role of a widow. What this incident implies is that the 'dalit' identity that the text constructs is in opposition to casteism wherein the caste system is seen to be operational only in the public sphere in relation with the upper castes. In the process, this 'dalit' identity ignores violence against dalit women, thereby defining the oppressed as well as resistant 'dalit' self implicitly as 'dalit man.'

The Outcaste (2003)

In Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* (translated from the Marathi original, *Akkarmashi*) (2003) the identity of a dalit is complicated by the author's negotiation with dual identities. Born of an upper-caste Patil father and a dalit Mahar mother, the author portrays the hybridity of his identity as the cause of his social ostracization. Estranged and discarded by both upper- and lower-caste communities, Limbale perceives the caste system as the main cause of his oppression. *The Outcaste* shows the never-ending journey of the author's identity as his question 'Who am I?' resonates throughout the autobiography.⁸⁷

The reviews of the autobiography primarily focus on the factuality of caste oppression and the author's struggle against it.⁸⁸ *The Outcaste* has also been seen as a gender-sensitive autobiography for giving space to several women characters and highlighting their oppression by upper-caste men.⁸⁹ On the other hand, G. N. Devy in his Introduction to *The Outcaste*, finds Limbale to be similar to a Western detached individual. Devy writes, 'In the life narrative, one finds that whereas the narrator should be boiling with anger, he is meditating on the very fundamental issues related to social relationships and ethics.'⁹⁰ The absence of 'anger' which Marathi dalit writers like Namdeo Dhasal expressed through their writings, appears for Devy a drawback in *The Outcaste*. Marathi dalit writings pioneered the nation-wide phenomenon of establishing a body of literature unique to their experiences. The first generation of

dalit writers such as Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, and Baburao Bagul, contributed immensely in shaping dalit literature in complete opposition to brahmanical politics and literary practices. In the process, as mentioned earlier, they often incorporated slang and everyday languages in their writing to express their anger. But to claim, like Devy, that anger is the only *authentic* way to portray dalit discontent is, in my opinion, simplistic. Limbale's contemplative style offers an equally effective resistance because the evaluation of events provides a critical perspective on the complexity of the caste system.

Central to the autobiography's argument is the author's negotiation with the identity of an illegitimate son. He writes, 'It is through the Dalit movement and Dalit literature that I understood that my mother was not an adulteress but the victim of the social system.'⁹¹ Limbale feels ashamed at his dalit identity and tries to hide it. He not only writes letters only to his upper-caste friends, he also hides photographs and books of Ambedkar in the trunk instead opting for novels by V. S. Khandekar (an upper-caste author), and feels ashamed of his relatives. Foregoing of ties with the past rural community seems to be the precondition of asserting an identity that is based on the new urban middle-class values. Limbale writes, 'We were ashamed of our past. We hid ourselves as a leper hides patches of rash on his skin. They couldn't guess my caste on the basis of my surname, so when they became suspicious they kept asking for the surname of my in-laws. I told lies. I said their name was Bhosale or Pawar or some other high-caste name instead of the real one, Kamble.'⁹²

His quest for his identity leads him to realize that his 'hybrid' birth will forever mark him as an outcaste. This realization leads him to understand his mother's rape by the upper-caste landlord as a consequence of caste oppression. By forcing Ithal Kamble (Masamai's husband) to leave Masamai (Limbale's mother), the upper-caste landlord, Hanmanta Limbale, had procured Masamai as his concubine. The rape of Masamai is thus viewed by Limbale

as a way to assert caste supremacy by the upper-caste landlord over the dalit husband and wife. Limbale, therefore, identifies his mother's rape as 'caste oppression'. This interpretation leads Limbale to believe that the only way to take revenge for the rape of his mother is by raping an upper-caste girl. He writes, 'Finally Parshya and I had dared to insult Shobhi. In fact we wanted to rape her by way of revenge. Shobhi stood before us as a symbol of the caste system. Her feet, her thighs, her arms, her face—everything was a part of the system she belonged to.'⁹³

These incidents reveal that Limbale invokes the sexual exploitation of his mother only to highlight his illegitimacy and the discriminations he faces because of it, while himself subscribing to the method of patriarchal sexual control (i.e., rape) fashioned on the upper-caste model as seen in this idea of revenge. This particular idea of revenge masculinizes dalit identity in terms of empowerment, thereby making 'dalit' synonymous with 'dalit man.' Moreover, in the autobiography, Limbale's mother being raped becomes a problem for Limbale only as it impacts him; the specific implications for dalit women of such sexual violence as part of caste oppression is not the focus of his self-construction of 'dalit' identity. The 'dalit' self that emerges through *The Outcaste* is, therefore, implicitly coded as masculine with dalit women defined only in relation to this normative identity.

The Scar (2009)

The Scar by K. A. Gunasekaran is considered the first modern Tamil dalit autobiography. According to Ravikumar, *The Scar* emerged out of the classic autobiographical 'yearning to create their society's history through their individual life story'.⁹⁴ Along with the simplicity of language, the relatability of the events and characters are considered the greatest achievements of this autobiography. Kandaswamy writes, 'When I had first read *Vadu* [the Tamil original] a few years ago, I felt I was listening to my

dad's story, to my lover's story, to almost every other rural dalit's story.⁹⁵ This association makes the particularities of Gunasekaran's experience universal. Therefore, even though the autobiography begins with the individual narrator, it succeeds in presenting life-histories of the collective. As a narrative of pain, *The Scar* has been treated as a social document that brings forth the realities of caste oppression.⁹⁶

Like *Joothan* and *The Outcaste*, *The Scar* highlights the caste system in its internal and external forms. Its criticism of external practices of caste is explicated through the numerous prohibitions imposed on dalits in terms of accessibility to water and roads, while the internalized form of caste is shown through the dalits accepting the higher-caste Konars as their masters when they 'proudly refer to "my master's house" and "your master's house" in their conversations.'⁹⁷ Furthermore, the author shows how it is not just Hindu society that identifies him by his caste, but constitutional rights such as the Reservation policy (strongly supported by Dalit Politics during its implementation) also legalize caste hierarchy by branding people as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. He recounts the shame he used to feel while filling up forms for scholarship for reserved category students. During class, the clerk would ask, 'How many in this class are Parayars? ... Put up your hands! How many are Pallars? Stand up, I will count.'⁹⁸ The 'scar' in *The Scar* symbolises 'the identity mark of the times' when he was both physically and psychologically scarred by caste oppression.⁹⁹ *The Scar*, therefore, creates a 'dalit' self as constantly struggling with caste oppression.

Gunasekaran, however, refuses to align with Dalit Politics. In an interview with Bharathiraja, he mentions, 'My writings and folk songs aim at liberating Dalits in all possible means. They are reaching all the people.'¹⁰⁰ Therefore, what Gunasekaran emphasizes is a dalit cultural identity. Unlike Valmiki and Limbale who posit the individual in relation to the community, Gunasekaran's resistance to caste through cultural activism makes

it a collective effort. This shows that movements are never static and there are many ways to pose political resistance. Just like Dalit Politics, cultural activism also serves as a method of resistance. Gunasekaran mentions that the purpose of writing this autobiography is to incite dalit youth to understand caste atrocities and struggle against them, and introduce to the non-dalits what caste atrocity looks like.¹⁰¹ Gunasekaran, therefore, does not limit the scope of anti-caste movement only among those who are born dalits. By making non-dalits aware of caste atrocity, Gunasekaran broadens the scope for affiliative politics.

Cultural identity also becomes a representative of liberatory dalit identity. Through the cultural activism and the valuation of oral culture, Gunasekaran reclaims dalit collective identity. He asserts that songs are one of the most popular media in dalit activism to communicate with the masses.¹⁰² Such modes of expression not only give visibility to the voices of dalits, but these songs, poems and dramas also create an alternative body of knowledge wherein subjugated knowledge and subjugated modes of articulation gain recognition. Furthermore, in *The Scar*, Gunasekaran says with pride, 'If Tanjavur is still famous for karagattam it is because of the Parayars, who have settled down in Mettu Street ... The artists who performed the nayandimelam were all from Mettu Street. They would wash their shirts and vettis in the river and dress up smart.'¹⁰³ Gunasekaran also describes a karagattam performer, Seenivachagam Annan, who was so popular that he could even afford pipes 'embellished with gold lockets'.¹⁰⁴ In this way, Gunasekaran shows that cultural activity creates an avenue for dalits to rise in class and also gain respect as 'artist[s]'.¹⁰⁵ Gunasekaran, therefore, creates an agentic 'dalit' selfhood in the cultural realm.

This 'dalit' cultural identity includes dalit women. While *Joothan* and *The Outcaste* largely ignore dalit women, including them in the texts only as victims of caste oppression, *The Scar* does focus on dalit women and not always as victims. One such

example is the karagattam dancer, Mallika. The author narrates that Mallika, despite being a dalit woman, is an established dancer and earns a lot of money, as evident through the 'gold on her ears and nose'.¹⁰⁶ Mallika's rise in class is seen as a challenge to the caste system and also highlights dalit assertion and agency in the cultural sphere. In the process, however, the aspect of gender remains unaddressed. The specificity of her experience as a dalit *woman* is not recognized. Mallika is hailed as the icon of the 'dalit' agential self who has overcome caste barriers through upward class mobility. Empowerment, therefore, is coded in terms of cultural agency leading to economic power, but in the process, what gets erased is the gender specificity. It is assumed that all dalits in the cultural realm, irrespective of their gender, are empowered through cultural agency resulting in economic upliftment. Hence, this 'dalit' identity subsumes dalit women within the general category of 'dalit'.

These three autobiographies present different views of the caste system and different ways of dealing with it. However, the 'dalit' identity that these autobiographies formulate is predominantly a male identity. Even though several dalit women appear in these autobiographies, their issues are not seen as constitutive of dalit identity in specifically gendered terms. In *Joothan*, the agency of 'dalit' selfhood is linked to education which is denied to dalit women. Consequently, 'dalit' identity foregrounds dalit men and dalit women remain excluded from its agential purview. In *The Outcaste*, 'dalit' is identified exclusively in terms of caste. In cases when dalit women's oppression actually comes to the fore, their experience of violence is understood in terms of how it affects dalit men as a form of caste violence. This shows how dalit identity, once again, is masculinized in terms of its assertion/agency, while dalit women remain the 'other' to this sense of selfhood. Unlike *Joothan* and *The Outcaste*, the 'dalit' identity in *The Scar* is not necessarily masculinized and dalit women are not always victimized (as is visible through its inclusion of dalit women like Mallika being

agentive). However, *The Scar* conflates men and women within the 'dalit' identity without recognizing any gender specificity. Once again, the focus remains on the single axis of caste.

CONSTRUCTING 'DALIT WOMAN': AN INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITY

Scholars have pointed out that women are fragmented into different groups not only based on caste, religion, and class,¹⁰⁷ but there are also disparities of gender and class within dalit communities.¹⁰⁸ Hence, to understand dalit women's issues, caste and gender cannot be treated as two mutually exclusive categories. Dalit women's writings are rooted in this realization that caste and gender are two interlinked systems of oppression. This intersectional understanding of identity challenges the singularity of gender and caste as the defining features of identity in mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics respectively, and emphasizes the notion of difference: both *within* and *among* groups.

The three autobiographies chosen for this section are Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (1984 [2009]), Bama's *Karukku* (1992 [2000]) and *Ami Keno Charal Likhi (Why I Write Charal as My Name)* by Kalyani Thakur Charal (2016). These three texts together help to trace the evolution of the constituency of Dalit Feminism, that is, 'dalit woman', through history in different regions and different times. *The Prisons We Broke* (originally serialised in Marathi in 1984) speaks of the Ambedkarite movements in Maharashtra during the 1950s and 1960s and dalit women's participation in them. *Karukku* (originally published in Tamil in 1992) was published during a time when dalit women and their voices, as distinct from dalit men's, started claiming recognition, and the first national dalit women's autonomous group, National Federation of Dalit Women (1995), was born. The primary difference in these two time periods lies in dalit women's solidarity with dalit men

during the Ambedkarite movements, and later on, dalit women's claim for autonomy from dalit men.

These autobiographies reflect a transition from the faith that with the erasure of caste the condition of dalit women would improve automatically, to the realization that centralization of caste in dalit movements results in the suppression of issues concerning dalit women. The former sentiment is captured in *The Prisons We Broke* where Baby Kamble talks about the internal patriarchal oppression of dalit women and later joins the Ambedkarite movement hoping for an overall emancipation of both dalit men and women of her community. While writings by dalit women from Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu have become canonical in representing a dalit feminist voice, recent emergence of dalit writings in Bangla has introduced a new facet to the caste system, that is, the refugee issue in the caste and gender context. The inclusion of *Ami Keno Charal Likhi*, therefore, becomes crucial in highlighting the complexities of caste, gender and citizenship and also pointing at the pervasion of casteism in Bengal. Through the study of these autobiographies I intend to explore how the identity of the dalit woman is constructed in contradistinction to 'woman' and 'dalit' through a simultaneous negotiation with gender and caste dynamics.

The Prisons We Broke (2008)

Termining it a 'socio-biography rather than autobiography', Maya Pandit in the Introduction to *The Prisons We Broke* writes about its foregrounding of the collective in contrast to the individual sense of selfhood that is evident in dalit men's writings.¹⁰⁹ In her interview with Maya Pandit, Baby Kamble says,

The suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people. And therefore *Jina Amucha* was the autobiography of my entire community.¹¹⁰

What becomes central to the selfhood envisioned by Kamble is a collective identity. Especially notable is her allusion to 'we' in the title of the autobiography. Furthermore, in contrast to *Joothan* and *The Outcaste* where the sole experience of caste oppression is highlighted, the 'we' in *The Prisons We Broke* emphasizes the need for solidarity among dalit men and women to achieve freedom. In the process, *The Prisons We Broke* refines the idea of the collective, in terms of a collective containing men and women, recognizing gender specificities and taking these differences into account while forging a solidarity.

In comparison to *Joothan* and *The Outcaste* where community is invoked as a context and extension to substantiate the struggle that the individual narrators go through, in *The Prisons We Broke* Kamble recognizes that the collective experience of oppression shapes her own consciousness. In her narration of collective oppression, she brings out the gradations of oppression that exist within her community:

If the Mahar community is the 'other' for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the 'other' for the Mahar men.¹¹¹

Kamble thus understands the oppression of dalit woman, not only in relation to the brahmanical hegemony of the caste system, but also in relation to dalit men.

Kamble recognizes the category 'dalit woman' as being simultaneously oppressed by caste-gender through her identification of dual patriarchies: brahmanical and dalit. She writes that dalit women confront 'brahmanical hegemony on the one hand and ... patriarchal domination on the other'.¹¹² As an example of brahmanical hegemony, Kamble refers to her father who aimed to achieve social respectability and power by emulating the upper-caste practice of keeping his wife within the house;¹¹³ and to highlight dalit patriarchy, she describes the heavy physical and verbal abused experienced by dalit women at their in-laws'

house.¹¹⁴ Kamble's awareness of dalit women's oppression comes from seeing her father taking pride in keeping her mother at home. She writes,

In those days, it was the custom to keep women at home, behind the threshold. The honour enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women of the house. when no one could see even a nail of the woman thus confined within the four walls of the house, then this 'honour' became the talk of the town—a byword among the relatives and friends in the surrounding villages. Then people would tell each other, how one Pandharinath Mistry kept his wife completely hidden in the house and how even the rays of the sun did not know her.¹¹⁵

Kamble's father represents an internal patriarchy which emulates the upper-caste practices of keeping women within the house. Moreover, he educates his wife about the value of morality over the importance of money. About her mother's situation Kamble writes, 'My father had locked up my aai in his house, like a bird in a cage.'¹¹⁶ This is reminiscent of Rassundari Devi in *Amar Jiban* who likens marriage to a prison.¹¹⁷ Rassundari Devi's condemnations of marriage lay in the imposition of household duties and rules of morality, and the restrictions on women about getting education. Kamble recognizes this practice as a structural problem as result of brahmanical hegemony. Moreover, by showing that it is the dalit man who implements such rules on dalit women, Kamble confronts the internal patriarchy as well.

However, this internal patriarchy is not just a reflection of brahmanical patriarchy. It has its own workings of patriarchal systems. In Baby Kamble's narrative we hear stories of girls married off at young age, becoming subject to the verbal and physical tortures of the mothers-in-law. Along with the heavy household work, the daughters-in-law have to listen to the mothers-in-law accusations: 'Look at the bhakris this slut has prepared. She cannot even make a few bhakris properly. Oh, well, what can one

expect of this daughter of a dunce?'¹¹⁸ In cases when daughters-in-law could not stand the suffering and ran away from house, heavy physical torture was awaiting them. Kamble writes how the mother-in-law would instigate her son by saying, 'Dhondya, what good is such a runaway wife to you? Some bastard must have made her leave you. She must be having an affair... Don't let her off so easily. Dhondya, cut off the tip of her nose; only then will my mother's heart breathe easy!'¹¹⁹ Dhondya's father would reinforce this even more by saying 'You are a man. You must behave like one!... Never mind if you have to go to prison for six months! You must chop off your wife's nose and present it to her brother and father. They mustn't have any respect left to sit with the members of the panch.'¹²⁰ The dalit patriarchy here functions at two levels: on the one hand, the assumed affair of the wife justifies her punishment, and on the other hand, it serves as a means to display the husband's masculine prowess over the wife and the men in her family. Such claiming of masculinity, exercised through the mutilation of the dalit woman's body-part, marks a distinctive nature of dalit patriarchy.

Kamble also goes on to show that it is not only dalit men who often imbibe brahmanical models, dalit women also internalize caste. These women's lives are dictated by Hindu religious rituals and superstitions. One such superstition is that dalit women would be possessed by goddesses and would supposedly tell the fortune of the people and point out their faults. Kamble mentions how being possessed would leave enormous emotional and physical toll over women. Along with 'earsplitting screams' these women would dance 'in frenzy till they collapsed in a heap on the floor, their jaws locked'.¹²¹ 'What kind of life did these people really lead?' Kamble asks. Kamble argues that such perpetuation of blind faith occurs due to the brahmanical control over knowledge. She writes, 'The entire community had sunk deep in the mire of such dreadful superstitions. The upper castes had never allowed this lowly caste of ours to acquire knowledge. Generations after generations, our

people rotted and perished by following such a superstitious way of life. Yet, we kept believing in your Hindu religion and serving you faithfully.¹²²

The dalit women in *The Prisons We Broke*, however, are not victims; they struggle and survive. Kamble mentions that starting from catching mice within the house¹²³ to taking initiative to send their children to schools,¹²⁴ all were done by dalit women. She argues that memories of humiliation and perpetual slavery need to be reiterated because future generations must know the fiery ordeal that the earlier generations have gone through. Threaded within the narrative are occasional recounts of dalit women's participation in activism. In the autobiography we see people gathering to discuss about Ambedkarite movement, his conversion, and their opinions on these movements. Dalit women's narratives thus voice protest against the exploitation by the external structures such as state, religion, and Brahmanism, as well as the internal gender hierarchies. Their writing emphasizes that their theorization grows out of their activism. Kamble believes that the Ambedkarite movement would end both caste and gender oppression on dalit women. She writes how Ambedkar's call to dalit women as the frontiers of 'change' instilled hope in the women in her community that by educating their next generation, converting to Buddhism, and participating in movements, the overall condition of the dalits would improve.¹²⁵

Kamble's realization of the anti-caste movement as a key to dalit women's liberation shows that in this construction of identity, 'dalit woman', while recognized in her gendered specificity, is not seen in opposition to dalit men, but as standing in solidarity while also demanding accountability. This identification is reminiscent of Alice Walker's notion of *womanism* defined as commitment 'to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female',¹²⁶ and the vision of the Combahee River Collective which states, 'We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.'¹²⁷ Understood

through solidarity, 'dalit woman' then is identified as a collective, politicized 'self'.

Karukku (2000)

Bama's *Karukku* focuses on caste and gender-based oppression in a Tamil dalit Christian community. Written as a bildungsroman, *Karukku* traces Bama's journey from being a believer in God as a child, to becoming a devoted nun, to becoming a disillusioned but politically enlightened 'dalit woman'. It is through her experiences of caste and gender-based oppression that Bama realizes that dalit women are located in completely different spheres than upper-caste men and women, as well as dalit men.

The 'selfhood' that Bama constructs presents a critique of 'dalit' identity by highlighting its patriarchal undertones, and fractures the notion of 'woman' by showing caste division among women. The former aspect is exemplified through the games she played as a child. In these games, the boys invariably acted 'as if they had a lot of power over us'.¹²⁸ The latter aspect is seen when Bama is demoted by an upper-caste nun from her post as a head teacher (despite having ten years of experience) because of her dalit identity.¹²⁹ This difference of 'dalit woman' from both 'woman' and 'dalit' reinforces the notion of intersectionality of caste and gender as creating specific conditions for dalit women, and challenges the erasure or the subsuming of dalit women within the generic identities of 'woman' and 'dalit' as seen in the autobiographies, namely, *Amar Jiban*, *My Story*, *Joothan*, and *The Outcaste*.

Karukku also highlights the hypocrisy of Christianity that sustains caste discrimination. Tamil Nadu has had a long history of dalits' converting into Christianity. Rupa Viswanath provides a remarkably detailed study of the conversion of dalits in the late nineteenth-century Madras Presidency.¹³⁰ She notes that even though dalits saw Christianity as 'an opportunity to escape' from the oppression of their 'landed caste masters', they were not readily

welcomed within the 'Christian fold'.¹³¹ Viswanath quotes an instance where the entry of dalit Christian children to a missionary school was met with severe opposition by high-caste parents. Moreover, 'Separate Pariah quarters were set up in famine-relief camps in response to the fact that if Pariahs were indiscriminately mixed with the rest of the population no one but they would seek relief. To resolve this issue even the kitchen was labelled 'Pariah' or 'Caste'.¹³²

Karukku highlights the continuation of such discrimination against dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu. Bama says that even though nuns were taught to live in poverty and humility, they lived lavish lives looking after the children of the rich upper-caste people and neglecting the poor lower-caste kids. The hypocrisy becomes clear through Bama's recounting of the scriptural lessons on the Devil. Bama writes how the nuns 'told us that if we kept on committing sins, the Devil would put them all down in a long list written in a big notebook, which he would show to God... [and] if we committed so many sins that the notebook actually filled up, then he would peel the skin off our backs and write our sins'.¹³³ Bama argues that this obsession with sin deepened her sense of inferiority. She writes that the convent life had changed her so much that she 'who had once been bold had become an extremely timid person, fearful of everything, ready to burst into tears, and without any strength'.¹³⁴ This conceptualization of sin as perpetuation of discrimination and hindrance to knowledge differs from that of Kamala Das's *My Story* where sin is manufactured to instil among young girls the notion of morality. By showing how the Church catered only to the needs of the upper castes, by providing them with benefits and comforts and reserving the higher posts of priest and nuns for the upper castes, and purposefully perpetuated caste hierarchy, Bama highlights the intersecting way in which caste and religion function.¹³⁵ Bama also realizes the futility of the Church-run boarding schools, which rather than educating the dalit children and making them aware of their situation, 'suggested that this was

the way it was meant to be for dalits; that there was no possibility of change'.¹³⁶

Bama's portrayal of education lies in identifying brahmanical control over knowledge as the root of the problem. To challenge this deliberate imposition of ignorance, Bama had decided to become a nun. Her desire to bring a change from within was not driven by assimilation or appropriation, but through intervention and reformation. Her realization that the hypocrisy of religion which interpreted 'one God within the church and another outside', was in fact a human construct, led her to proclaim:

We should never believe one thing and do another. We should speak up about what we believe, and act according to that. That is being true to oneself. Everything else is play-acting. I never cared to survive by acting out a role.¹³⁷

This 'dalit woman,' however, is not a separatist identity. Bama's self-representation as a 'Dalit woman ... [living] as an independent woman ... [and working] for the liberation of Dalits' in the last part of her autobiography, presents her identity as arising from the textured experiences of caste and gender realities and therefore aligned in solidarity with dalit men and women in the community.¹³⁸ In her introduction titled 'Ten Years Later', Bama writes how the autobiography, which was originally meant for healing her 'inward wounds' became 'a means of relieving the pain of others who were wounded'.¹³⁹ Writing and publication thus not only gives the author and her voice visibility, they also create an opportunity for others to relate to the experiences of oppression. This is reminiscent of the excitement Barbara Christian expressed when, as a graduate student in 1967, she came across Paule Marshall's autobiographical novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones*: '[it] was not just a text; it was an accurate and dynamic embodiment both of the possibilities and improbabilities of my own life. In it I as subject encountered myself as object.... It was crucial to a deeper

understanding of my own life.¹⁴⁰ For Bama, the writing of her autobiography becomes a political act because, as Bama claims, 'Karukku stands as a means of strength to the multitudes whose identities have been destroyed and denied.'¹⁴¹ Hence, like Kamble in *The Prisons We Broke*, she envisions a solidarity-based identity as defining the selfhood of 'dalit women'.

Ami Keno Charal Likhi (2016)

While *The Prisons We Broke* represents the Ambedkarite movement and *Karukku* brings out the complexities of caste, gender and religion in Tamil Nadu, *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* makes an important contribution by focusing on caste, gender and citizenship in Bengal. This literature holds special significance in the pan-Indian spectrum of dalit literature due to its unique narration of and experience as 'dalit refugee'.

Citizenship as dictated by the Constitution of India has been a matter of immense debate and dissent since its first drafting. The Constitutional ideas of who is a citizen and what constitutes citizenship in India have been challenged through the lenses of caste, gender and religion. Post-Partition India saw an increasing debate over the question of the rightful citizens of the nation. This discomfort resulted in incorporating the refugees within the 'Hindu' fold.¹⁴² This new nation, according to Haimanti Roy, 'produced categories, debated within the hallowed halls of officialdom in Delhi, Calcutta, and Dacca, and given legal sanction through ordinances and laws debated and passed by parliamentary and state legislations'.¹⁴³ The subject of Constitution and citizenship recently gained renewed attention with the Indian government's imposition of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) in 2019. This policy has come under fire for implementing religious segregation and wasting time and money. The CAA aims to identify illegal immigrants and deport or keep them in isolation. In actuality, however, this move is also seen as catering to a unified

'Indian' (and Hindu) identity. India after Partition struggled to turn colonial subjects into national citizens. In this context, the identity as a 'Hindu' served as a means to 'otherise' Muslim dominated Pakistan and East-Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and unify 'Hindu Indians' against Islamic oppression. This new category incorporated dalit refugees within its fold.¹⁴⁴ Roy further adds that 'these identities were produced discursively, mediated through the actions of officials located at the periphery of the nation, especially at the borders and diplomatic missions.... Implicit within these redefinitions were the attempts of each state to establish a minority citizen's loyalty to the state'.¹⁴⁵

In a detailed historical investigation of the question of caste and caste prejudice within progressive Bengali society, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay reveals that in 'the complex interplay between social and ideological factors and political circumstances ... caste was as much a potent factor in determining social relations in colonial Bengal as it was in any other region of India'.¹⁴⁶ The Bengal partition is tarnished by bloodied histories of Marichjhapi,¹⁴⁷ economic exclusion and struggle for survival. This strategic segregation was not only directed to resolve the 'refugee problem,' it also absorbed within itself the brahmanical hierarchization through caste. The detailed studies on the Marichjhapi massacre bear evidence to the mainstream erasure of caste genocide.¹⁴⁸ The newly emerging scholarship on partition in Bengal and writings by Bengali dalit writers have contributed immensely in bringing out the complex interrelation between caste and citizenship.

Terming it as 'a consolidated movement within Bangla literature', Manohar Mouli Biswas views Bengali dalit literature as challenging the brahmanical supremacy over mainstream Bengali literature and views dalit writings in Bengali as 'revolutionary' activism that can 'actually bring about social change'.¹⁴⁹ Bengali dalit literature, therefore, marks a systemic and epistemological intervention. This holds special significance in the context of Bengal where the early arrival of Marxist ideology created a

sense of political awareness among the Bengali intelligentsia who viewed oppression in terms of class and ignored/denied the existence of caste.¹⁵⁰ Bengali dalit literature challenges the belief that the Bengali educated and Left-aligned community is unmarked by caste. While the status as a dalit refugee in West Bengal in India brought into focus the pervasiveness of the caste system, it would be wrong to assume that even as dalit refugees, their experiences are similar. Herein the issue of gender as a category intersectional with caste becomes important. Bengali dalit women's writings, therefore, provide a different and new layer of understanding through an intersectional perspective and an unconventional counter-narrative.

Ami Keno Charal Likhi (2016), literally meaning *Why I Write Charal as My Name*, is rooted in the construction of her identity. The author, Kalyani Thakur Charal, mentions that after their arrival in West Bengal (India), they faced caste discrimination and changed their surname to 'Thakur'. She writes, 'All our relatives, including my father and father's cousins, changed their surname into "Thakur".¹⁵¹ They were forced to take this decision because of social pressure and with the expectation to erase caste stigma. But a change in surname does not ensure a change in one's caste identity. Even if we replace the word, "untouchable" with "harijan" or "dalit", the situation does not change.'¹⁵² The author experiences caste discrimination in school despite having a surname not indicative of her caste. That is why she decides to add 'Charal' to her surname.¹⁵³ She mentions an incident on her first day at an office: 'One by one people came and interviewed me... Once they left, I saw the fox-like Dey babu and Bhattacharya babu whispering among themselves, "Which caste?" To this I loudly replied, "Charal". My sudden bold proclamation shocked everyone. They were not used to a dalit openly identifying his/her caste.'¹⁵⁴ Much like Baby Kamble, Thakur Charal considers the proclamation of her dalit identity as agential. This sensitivity comes from her disillusionment that a change in surname never

ensures erasure of caste.¹⁵⁵ Like Bama, she gets educated, gets a job, but soon realizes that these institutions are the locations where caste gets continually implemented and reproduced.

Thakur Charal experiences a life which is thrice displaced: as a dalit, a woman, and a refugee. She mentions how dalit women refugees bore the brunt of this displacement. In relation to the impact of Partition in Bengal, academic discussions have followed the failure of 'alienation to integration' policy¹⁵⁶ especially in the context of the Marichjhapi massacre.¹⁵⁷ Displacement and the problem of citizenship, however, had specific consequence for dalit women. Thakur Charal writes, 'It was common among poor dalit refugees to sell their girl children in exchange of money. They took my aunt's daughter to Delhi in promise of giving work. She did not know that she was sold. Next day she sent a postcard begging uncle to bring her back. When I demanded to see that postcard, uncle angrily retorted that it was lost.'¹⁵⁸ While refugee women (especially those without the protection of men) were often subject to rapes and abductions,¹⁵⁹ the specificity of dalit women refugees' condition (as seen in case of Thakur Charal's cousin) is a result of caste, gender and poverty. U. Sen notes,

Within the population of East Bengali refugees, those most able to actualise an alternative vision of rehabilitation were the relatively elite bhadraloks from Eastern Pakistan who had fallen upon hard times, but were far from destitute. In stark contrast, the most marginalized amongst the refugees—the Namasudra peasants of eastern Bengal—towed the line of official policy and completely internalised the hegemonic discourse of rehabilitation.¹⁶⁰

U. Sen further points that the bhadralok refugees occupied the better colonies of Calcutta, while dalit refugees were often sent to the Andaman Islands and to Dandakaranya.¹⁶¹ Sen's argument reveals the close interlink between caste and class. The segregation of dalits in distant rehabilitation camps indicates the

perpetuation of the stigma of untouchability. Even in Calcutta, Thakur Charal mentions that upper-caste and dalit refugees lived on different sides of the street.¹⁶² Coupled with untouchability was poverty which pervaded the lives of dalit refugees. And it was dalit women who received severe consequences in the form of being sold for money. Partition, therefore, reveals specific consequences on dalit women.

Thakur Charal's autobiography forces us to see that violence inflicted on dalit women refugees is not merely a result of their sex; it is a structural issue where dalit women's bodies are made into sites to exercise control. The Marichjhapi massacre, in fact, began with police brutality directed towards dalit women. Some survivors recount how the police killed a few dalit women by drowning their boats, and how dalit women were taken to the police station by force and were gang raped for days.¹⁶³ These events caused confrontation between the refugees and the police, the ultimate outcome of which was that massacre of Marichjhapi. Dalit women refugees became the immediate victims of the structural consequences of caste, partition, relocation and government policy. In this context, MacKinnon's reading of the genocide in Bosnia (1995) may be useful. MacKinnon criticizes the legal representation of the issue as solely a matter of racial or ethnic discrimination and points out that,

The destruction of the women of an ethnic community through rape [should be] recognized as destroying their community. Genocide was not marginalized; instead, women were made central in its more capacious frame.... The fact that this genocide was in part conducted through gender crimes did not mean that the acts were not also ethnically and nationally and religiously destructive. It meant they were.¹⁶⁴

MacKinnon thus provides an important corrective in the dominant understanding of rape as solely gender violence, instead reframing it through the intersectional lens. Similarly, the rapes of

dalit women in the Marichjhapi massacre need to be re-scripted within the broader frameworks of caste and citizenship, and seen how control over a community is exercised by making gender oppression central. As Maria Mies argues, 'Women are seen as the only property that pauperized men still possess. The rape of their women teaches poor men the lesson that their status is one of absolute powerlessness and propertylessness.'¹⁶⁵ Rape, therefore, is utilized as a tool to oppress the marginalized community as a whole. Gender oppression within dalit refugees was also a common practice. Thakur Charal recounts innumerable incidents, including her own sister's gang rape, pregnancy before marriage, pregnancy of widows, severe domestic violence on the girls at their in-laws' houses, and desertion by husbands.¹⁶⁶ This is a clear mark of dalit patriarchy bearing similarity with that in *The Prisons We Broke*.

Dalit women refugees' physical oppression is not the only content of Thakur Charal's autobiography, she also mentions the erasure/ignorance in academia and activism. Contesting such erasures, the identity that Thakur Charal creates is a collective identity. Her autobiography is strewn with the lives of other dalit women, especially her sister, her grandmother and her mother. It was pain which made this bond stronger. Thakur Charal mentions how, throughout her life, she has lived as a caregiver for her sister who often suffered from mental illness. But her death left an enormous emptiness within the author. She writes, 'Relatives, neighbours, everyone heaved a sigh of relief at her death. That person, who had captured a lot of my time, left me completely empty. She wanted to live so badly! For one year I could not keep even a picture of hers in the house—such was her presence.'¹⁶⁷ This bond is not limited only to interpersonal relationships. Thakur Charal mentions that publishing the magazine, *Neer*, a Bangla magazine that publishes writings on and from dalit literature, created a space for her to engage in a collective process of protest against dalit women's oppression.¹⁶⁸ She, in fact, views writing as activism. In the introduction of the autobiography, Thakur Charal mentions

that this book is a conscious intervention in dominant Brahmanism and patriarchy. It promotes a particular perspective to destabilize dominant ideologies. This conscious 'self' believes in solidarity. The ending of the book is the most reassuring and rewarding. Thakur Charal ends by documenting a workshop organized in Pondicherry in 2012 by Sparrow Women's Archive that brought together twelve dalit women writers from six states across India. This workshop consisted not only of dalit women writers sharing their writings it also showcased drama, autobiographical accounts, narratives by dalit women activists and so on.¹⁶⁹ This workshop highlighted dalit women's organizational power and the need to build solidarity across regions, cultures and modes of articulation. The identity that Thakur Charal creates as a 'dalit woman', is hence, an affinity-based identity.

The Prisons We Broke, *Karukku* and *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* show how an intersectional identity, that is, 'dalit woman', challenges the single-axis formulation of 'woman' and 'dalit'. In the process, the concept of dual patriarchies revises the mainstream feminist notion of patriarchy (understood only in terms of gender) and the anti-caste notion of the caste system as the primary source of oppression for all members of the dalit community irrespective of gender. Dalit women's writings, therefore, highlight the specificity of gender within dalit communities and urge a recognition of difference among women. The 'dalit woman' that emerges through these varied constructions of selfhood in dalit women's autobiographies is a politically aware and consciously chosen 'self' that is quite distinct from the 'self' constituted through individual experiences of the subject in autobiographies canonised by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics.

CONCLUSION

The 'self' constructed in all these autobiographies present three different identities: the 'woman' as implicitly savarna, the 'dalit' as

implicitly dalit man (which includes dalit women insofar as they are considered exclusively in terms of their caste identity), and the 'dalit woman' as an explicitly intersectional category. Although all these autobiographies have contributed immensely in redefining the contours of gender and caste, this comparative analysis of the three sets of autobiographies points out that the exclusivity of single-axis identity in the construction of 'woman' and 'dalit' erases, or at the very least, fails to address the dalit woman in her intersectional specificity. By establishing dalit women's identity as that which is affected by mutual and intersecting structures of caste/and gender, dalit women's autobiographies highlight the dalit feminist identification of the constituency, that is, dalit woman, as a specific category. In the process dalit women's autobiographies also highlight how different issues—the dichotomy between public and private, the issue of sexuality and domesticity, the liberatory potential of education, and the idea of collective emancipation—are redefined in relation to this specific intersectional identity.

Dalit women's autobiographies challenge the mainstream feminist understanding of women's oppression in terms of their confinement to the domestic within a strict personal/public dichotomy (as seen in *Amar Jiban* and *My Story*). For dalit women, whose work necessitates their presence in the public sphere, confinement to the domestic is not an issue. The perceived dichotomy between the public and the private is linked to sexuality. For example, in *My Story* the author narrates how, after marriage, she was expected by her mother-in-law to fulfil her 'domestic responsibilities'¹⁷⁰ by housekeeping, sewing buttons and providing her husband with daily amenities, while also giving in to her husband's demands of sexual union which often equalled to marital rape.¹⁷¹ Imprisonment of women within the domestic therefore served as a controlling mechanism to keep not only women's sexuality in check, it also actively worked towards moulding young wives into ideal wives. This is indicative of patriarchy within

mainstream Indian Feminism. It is for this reason that exploration of sexuality outside the domestic marital relationship is seen by Kamala Das as liberatory. On the other hand, *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* shows the problematics of sexuality through dual patriarchies where the elder sister, due to the brahmanical assumption of dalit women's sexual availability, is raped by her upper-caste teacher, and after her marriage her in-laws throw her out of the house blaming her for being raped.¹⁷² This shows that unlike upper-caste women, dalit women's sexuality is not liberatory: it is casteist sexism that underwrites dalit women's sexual oppression.

Dalit women's autobiographies also reveal the inextricable link between the public and the private in the way they redefine caste oppression as caste and gender oppression. While in *Joothan*, *The Outcaste* and *The Scar*, the dalit male protagonists negotiate with the caste system outside their homes, on the streets, in schools and at workplaces, dalit women autobiographers focus on internal oppression such as dalit women's confinement within the house and abuse by their husbands. For example, in *Joothan* the author feels contemptuous to see dalits eating leftovers with 'a lot of relish',¹⁷³ *The Scar* scorns at how dalit people address higher castes as 'master'.¹⁷⁴ Internalization of casteism, therefore, is criticized by dalit writers to express how these specific feelings of inferiority need to be challenged through a 'dalit' identity-based assertion. Contrastingly, in *The Prisons We Broke*, Kamble writes that if a dalit husband suspected his young wife of adultery, he would chop her nose off as punishment and 'present it to her brother and father' to display his masculine prowess over the wife and the men in her family.¹⁷⁵ Kamble also writes that her father wanted to achieve social respectability and power by emulating the upper-caste practice of keeping women within the house.¹⁷⁶ Here we see an emulative form of dalit patriarchy which aspires to become brahmanical by imposing the brahmanical ideas of 'honour' on dalit women. While dalit autobiographers challenge internalization

of casteism to create opposition between upper castes and dalits, dalit women writers show that the internalization of brahmanical patriarchy by dalit men leads to specific gendered power relations within the dalit community. What dalit women's writings reveal is the need to recognize the caste system existing not only in the public sphere, but also in conjunction with gender within the domestic.

In terms of education, dalit women's autobiographies contest the mainstream feminist notion of education as agency (in terms of freedom from, and opposition to, patriarchy) and the dalit idea of education as economic independence, by expressing distrust about formal education. In *Karukku*, Bama is initially led to believe by her father and brother that 'if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities'.¹⁷⁷ But she is disillusioned when she joins a boarding school as a nun only to find out that the dalit students are made to do all the menial work in the school and are taught that 'there was no possibility of change'.¹⁷⁸ *Karukku*, therefore, provides a different approach to education compared to *Amar Jiban*, *The Scar* and *Joothan*. In *Amar Jiban*, Rassundari mentions that the ability to read and write gives her voice and provides a way to escape the daily drudgeries of household work. Access to education, in mainstream feminist articulation, is seen as self-assertion and defiance of patriarchy. For dalit men in texts such as *The Scar* and *Joothan*, education becomes a way to achieve liberation from caste oppression through economic independence. *Karukku* however highlights the failure of formal education as a means of liberation. Bama, in fact, transforms the notion of education to take it beyond its formal associations with literacy and economic mobility to define it in terms of achieving political awareness through experience which is articulated in a collective manner.¹⁷⁹

This emphasis on collective emancipation, rather than the liberation of the individual, makes dalit women's autobiographies challenge the conventional autobiographical 'self'. For example,

in *Joothan*, it is the individual's emancipation through economic independence which gains prominence. Although *Joothan* does invoke the community, it is only to provide the necessary context of caste oppression against which the individual is seen to struggle and rise. Throughout the autobiography, it is Valmiki and his life that are central to the emancipatory aspects of the narrative. On the other hand, in *Karukku* and *Ami Keno Charal Likhi*, the authors locate themselves within the collective. In *Ami Keno Charal Likhi*, other people's stories and lives are incorporated to show how they shape the protagonist's outlook towards life. In the introduction to *Karukku*, Bama mentions that her writing of this autobiography has been a means to heal the pains of all those who were wounded by similar experiences of oppression. In *The Prisons We Broke*, Kamble argues that for a more effective opposition to casteism and sexism, men and women need to stand in solidarity. Dalit women's intersectional identity and the notion of dual patriarchies therefore not only fracture the homogeneous constructions of 'woman' and 'dalit,' they also change the way caste and gender are looked at by emphasizing different perspectives on issues such as sexuality, education and the meaning of emancipation.

Through this study of autobiographies what becomes clear is that it is impossible to conceptualize identity in singular terms. Systemic hierarchies create internal divisions *within* categories (of women as well as dalits). This is the precise reason why Dalit Feminism claims that while analysing and formulating dalit women's identity, it is necessary to recognize the implications of simultaneous oppression by caste and gender. Recognizing how the given structures constitute identities that vary from group to group, Dalit Feminism challenges unitary identities such as 'woman' and 'dalit,' and proceeds to intervene in these singular constructions by foregrounding the constituency 'dalit woman' as an intersectional identity.

NOTES

- 1 Sukirtharani, 'Infant Language'. In *Wild Words: Four Tamil Poets* (2012): 77.
- 2 Following Lacanian concept of the split subject, Cixous locates 'woman' as forever defined through 'dual, hierarchical oppositions' (1997: 232). She argues that in order to resist their silencing, women need a language, an 'écriture feminine', to write towards their difference. Defining women's writing as 'a new insurgent' that creates 'indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history,' Cixous points out that by writing, a woman returns to the body 'confiscated' from her. Writing also marks a 'woman's seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression'. Hence women's writing signals a feminist reclamation of agency and awareness of the self. This method of women's alternative writing style was seen as an enabling mode which, through its 'disconnected, fragmentary' nature, challenged the coherence propounded in male autobiographies (Jelinek 1980: 17). Their chaotic language reflected the social conditions they live in, and in terms of language, this mode of writing became an alternative site to express their desires and difference. See Cixous, 'Sorties' (1997): 231–35; Jelinek, *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (1980).
- 3 The Introduction by Arjun Dangle in his edited book, *Poisoned Bread*, provides a detailed study on the emergence of dalit literature in Maharashtra and its characteristics (Dangle, *Poisoned Bread* (2009): xxiv–xxxii. For more on Dhasal, see *ibid.*: xxxviii–xli).
- 4 Holmström, 'Translator's Note' (2012): 104.
- 5 Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (1989): 4–6.
- 6 Friedman, 'Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice' (1998): 72.
- 7 Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988): 20.
- 8 Smith and Watson, eds., *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (1998): 5.
- 9 Chodorow, *Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978).
- 10 *Ibid.*: 44.
- 11 Anderson, *Conversation, Language and Possibilities: A Postmodern Approach to Therapy* (1997): 231.
- 12 Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1994): 69.
- 13 Mostern, *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth-Century America* (2004): 10; see also Bloom, *Composition Studies as a Creative Art* (1998): 64–75.
- 14 Mostern, *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth-Century America* (2004): 12.
- 15 Hodges, 'The Divided Self and the Quest for Wholeness in Black American Autobiography' (1990): 439.
- 16 Gates, Jr., 'Writing 'Race', and the Difference It Makes' (1985): 11.

- 17 Smith, 'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism' (1978): 20.
- 18 Ibid.: 21.
- 19 Ibid.: 20.
- 20 Rowbotham, *Women's Consciousness, Man's World* (1973): 31.
- 21 Friedman, 'Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice' (1998): 75.
- 22 Devika, *Her-Self: Early Writings on Gender by Malayalee Women* (2008): 139; in the Indian context, the idea of women as partners of men, or *sahadharmini*, contributed immensely in neatly dividing the 'public' and the 'private.' Deemed to be a *dharma* or a scriptural rule, women naturally internalized this position. The term *saha*, meaning together/along with, neutralized any sense of hierarchy and created a false notion of equality. *Sahadharmini* became a popular trope in the nineteenth-century reformation because it ensured that even when women became part of the progressive narrative, they never crossed the limit *allowed to them*. See P. Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question' (1989).
- 23 Devika, *Her-Self: Early Writings on Gender by Malayalee Women*: 139.
- 24 Karlekar, *Voices from Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women* (1993): 12.
- 25 Harish, *Indian Women's Autobiographies* (1993): 8.
- 26 Dinesh Chandra Sen (1866–1939). *Vanga Sahitya Parichaya or Selections from the Bengali Literature*, vol. 2 Calcutta.; All translations from *Amar Jiban* hereafter are mine.
- 27 Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993): 138.
- 28 For a detailed analysis see Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question' (1989).
- 29 Mathur, 'De-scribing the Indian Woman: New Autobiographical Ventures by Indian Women Writers in English' (2008–09): 47–48.
- 30 Mazumdar, 'Foreword' in *Voices from Within*: x.
- 31 Karlekar, *Voices from Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women* (1993): 61–62.
- 32 Ibid.: 61.
- 33 Ibid.: 7.
- 34 Rassundari writes that after her departure from her mother's house all she used to do was cry. 'At that time my mother-in-law used to take me on her lap and console me. I give my thanks to Parameshwar. Such a beautiful incident!' R. Devi, *Amar Jiban* (1876): 24.
- 35 Ibid.: 22.
- 36 Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of a Modern Autobiography* (2013): 220.
- 37 Ibid.: 220.
- 38 Rassundari writes: 'At that time women did not get education. After the work in the house and lunch, the little bit of time that was left, women were

supposed to stand very humbly near the *karta* of the house. As if women did not have any other work. At that time people used to treat women like this. Especially there was a rule for wives that they will have to wear a foot-long veil and work in the house. She was considered a very good wife if she refrained from speaking to anybody. At that time the clothes were not soft like now—they were thick. I used to wear such clothes and draw my veil to my chest and work. I never used to speak to anyone else. Like the oil-churning ox, our eyes were always covered. We could not see anything except for our own feet. These kind of rules prevailed the entire life of the wives. I, too, followed them.' *Amar Jiban*: 29.

- 39 Sodhi, *Indian English Writing: The Autobiographical Mode* (1999): 52.
- 40 R. Devi, *Amar Jiban*: 57.
- 41 Deboshruti Roychowdhury mentions that the autobiographies written by women in the nineteenth century 'testifying to the valour, vigour, strength, and determination' through which they broke free 'from indigenous customs such as purdah and the ban on female education' could be accessible only to 'a few women of advantageous position'. She further states that this was a specifically brahmanical paradigm where women's apparent freedom was continuously kept in check by keeping alive the tradition of docility towards the husband. Roychowdhury, *Gender and Caste Hierarchy in Colonial Bengal: Inter-caste Interventions of Ideal Womanhood* (2014): 149–50.
- 42 Banerjee, 'Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal' (1989): 129.
- 43 Such attitude of ignorance/non-engagement towards marginalized women was a common phenomenon in Western Feminism till as late as the 1960s. Pioneering feminist texts such as *The Second Sex* (1953) by Simone de Beauvoir, the sexed/gendered body presented a specific, white, western image of women which omitted experiences and oppressions of black women.
- 44 R. Devi, *Amar Jiban*: 56–57.
- 45 Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question': 244–45.
- 46 R. Devi, *Amar Jiban*: 27.
- 47 Ramakrishnan, 'Review' (1977, Spring): 332.
- 48 Devika, 'Housewife, Sex Worker and Reformer: Controversies over Women Writing Their Lives in Kerala' (2006): 1676.
- 49 Das, *My Story* (1977): 78.
- 50 *Ibid.*: 21.
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 Devika, 'Housewife, Sex Worker and Reformer': 1676.
- 53 *Ibid.*: 1676.
- 54 S. Smith, 'Autobiographical Manifestos': 436.
- 55 Anderson, 'At the Threshold of the Self: Women and Autobiography' (1986): 59.

- 56 Devika, 'The Aesthetic Woman: Re-forming Female Bodies and Minds in Early Twentieth-Century Keralam' (2005): 484.
- 57 Das, *My Story*: 75; 84.
- 58 The phrase is borrowed from Adrienne Rich who stresses on the necessity of doing a feminist critique of compulsory heterosexuality. In her criticism of Chodorow, Rich argues that feminist theory till Chodorow, has viewed lesbianism as an 'alternative lifestyle' and has accepted heterosexuality as norm. Thus, the feminist critique of women's roles as mothers, ironically presented motherhood resulting from heterosexual union as the norm. Rich argues that women's emotional and erotic sentiments are always regulated by society. Restraining homosexual union and presenting heterosexuality as the 'normal' way of fulfilling desires/duties are socially dictated. It is for this reason that Rich calls heterosexuality as a 'political institution'. Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1997): 321.
- 59 John and Nair, *A Question of Silence: The Sexual Economies of Modern India* (1998): 1-2.
- 60 Feminist scholarship on the question of sexuality in India have made some groundbreaking contributions. In the introduction to *A Question of Silence*: vii, John and Nair argue that we need to be cautious about the conspiracy of silence regarding sexuality in India. Sexuality as a feminist issue, as John and Nair point out, emerged in Indian Feminism only during the late 1990s and early 2000s. John and Nair, *A Question of Silence: The Sexual Economies of Modern India* (1998).
- 61 Sen and Dhawan, 'Feminisms and the Politics of Gender: A History of the Indian Women's Movement' (2012): 12-13.
- 62 Bhasin and Khan, *Some Questions on Feminism and its Relevance in South Asia* (1986): 2-3.
- 63 Das, *My Story*: 24-25.
- 64 Omvedt, 'Literature of Revolt: Prefatory Note' (2009): xiii.
- 65 Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* (2004): 105.
- 66 Satyanarayana and Tharu eds., *No Alphabet in Sight* (2011): 13.
- 67 *Ibid.*: 13.
- 68 Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu* (1996); Valmiki, *Joothan* (2003): 1; Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu* (2006): xii
- 69 Beth, 'Hindi Dalit Autobiography: An Exploration of Identity' (2007): 545-74.
- 70 Muktibodh, 'What Is Dalit Literature?' (1992): 270.
- 71 Dangle, *Poisoned Bread* (1992): xxiv-xxxii.
- 72 Nandy, 'Foreword' (2010): xi.
- 73 *Ibid.*: xlviii.
- 74 Satyanarayana and Tharu eds., *No Alphabet in Sight*: 21.
- 75 Valmiki, *Joothan* (2003): xxix.