

## **CHAPTER – I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Dalit women's narratives, particularly in regional languages, have often been overlooked or marginalized in mainstream literary discourse. While the Dalit literary movement has gained momentum over the decades, many of these writings remain inaccessible to non-native speakers due to the lack of English translations. Furthermore, when translations are available, they might not capture the nuanced cultural, social, and linguistic undertones of the original narratives. This leads to the absence of a holistic understanding of the diverse experiences of Dalit women across various regions of India. The significance of Dalit women's narratives extends beyond mere literary interest. These autobiographies offer invaluable insights into the lived realities, struggles, and aspirations of Dalit women, who face dual marginalization due to their caste and gender. Given that India is home to over a billion people, with a significant portion identifying as Dalits, it becomes crucial to understand the delicate challenges Dalit women face across different states and linguistic communities.

Translation, particularly into globally accessible languages like English, serves as a bridge to connect these narratives to a broader audience, fostering more significant cultural and academic exchanges. However, the absence of such translations, or the lack of their depth and quality, leads to a skewed representation, often resulting in an incomplete or misinformed perspective on the socio-cultural realities of Dalit women. In the broader landscape of world literature and cultural studies, translations of Dalit women's autobiographies can contribute significantly to global discourses on gender, caste, and resistance. The absence or misrepresentation, therefore, is not only a loss to Indian literary discourse but to world literature as a whole. Addressing this gap will not only correct the representation. Still, it will also amplify the voices of Dalit women on global platforms, enabling a richer, more diverse dialogue on the challenges they face and the resilience they display.

Despite the growing recognition of Dalit literature, there remains a significant gap in the comprehensive understanding and appreciation of Dalit women's autobiographies, especially when juxtaposed against the socio-cultural and historical backdrops of the

Dalit community. While autobiographies like Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008), Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008), Bama's *Karukku* (2000), and Viramma's *Viramma: Life of a Dalit* (2000) provide invaluable insights, the English translations of these works might not always capture the intricate nuances of the original Marathi and Tamil texts. This study addresses the lack of in-depth comparative analysis of Dalit women's life experiences in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, emphasizing their sufferings, protests, and self-assertions to establish their social identity and status.

Dalit women's autobiographies emerge as personal tales and socio-political commentaries that mirror the intersecting oppressions of caste and gender in Indian society. By focusing on these narratives, this study aims to bring forth the profound socio-cultural and historical nuances that often remain subsumed or overlooked in broader Dalit literary discourses. Translating regional literature into English can sometimes dilute the original text's inherent essence and cultural subtleties. By analyzing the selected works in their English translations, the study also seeks to understand the layers of interpretation and meaning that may be added or lost in the translation process.

The Dalit community, often called the 'untouchables,' comprises the lowest rank within the Hindu caste system. This complex social stratification system has been ingrained in Indian society for centuries. 'Dalit' translates to 'oppressed' or 'broken' in Sanskrit, a term the community has chosen to represent their struggle against caste-based discrimination. Historically, the Dalits have been marginalized and oppressed, relegated to the peripheries of society, and subjected to extreme poverty, social exclusion, and discrimination due to their caste status. They were, and often still are, forced to perform menial and degrading tasks considered "impure" by higher castes.

The plight of Dalits has its roots in the ancient texts of Hindu law, which divided society into four main varnas, or castes, namely the Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (traders), and Shudras (servants). Those who fell outside this four-fold system, mostly doing 'polluting' work, came to be known as 'untouchables' or Dalits. Despite being outlawed by the Indian constitution in 1950, caste-based discrimination persists in many parts of India, affecting every aspect of a Dalit's life, including access to education, employment, housing, and fundamental human rights. Culturally, the Dalit community has developed a rich repertoire of oral

traditions, music, literature, and art, often serving as an outlet for their collective pain and protest. The rise of Dalit literature, in particular, has played a pivotal role in voicing their sufferings and struggles, challenging the mainstream narratives, and advocating for social justice and equality. In recent decades, there has been a surge of autobiographical narratives by Dalit women writers, offering unique insights into their lived experiences and their resistance against the dual oppression of caste and gender.

Despite their challenges, the Dalit community has shown remarkable resilience and resistance, with many Dalits rising to prominent positions in various fields and advocating for social reform and equality. However, the journey towards equality and justice is ongoing, and the Dalit community continues fighting against deeply entrenched prejudices and socio-economic disparities. The emancipation of Dalits has been a central theme in India's socio-political landscape. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a Dalit himself and the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, spearheaded a radical movement to challenge caste-based discrimination and to secure constitutional rights for Dalits. His contributions to the empowerment of Dalits and his advocacy for social reform have made him a revered figure within the Dalit community. Reform movements, such as the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra in the 1970s, also brought to the forefront the blatant human rights violations faced by the Dalit community. They used literature, primarily in the Marathi language, as a powerful tool to protest against caste atrocities, significantly impacting regional and national politics.

Dalit literature, an important part of this reform movement, has emerged as a distinct literary genre. It delves into the lived experiences of Dalits, portraying their sufferings, oppressions, and protests. While most Dalit literature has been dominated by male voices, in recent years, there has been an increase in narratives by Dalit women, which add a crucial dimension of gender to the understanding of caste-based oppression. The autobiographies by Dalit women, such as the ones this book focuses on, provide a first-hand account of the intersectional oppression faced by women in the Dalit community. Their narratives serve as poignant reminders of the harsh realities Dalit women face, but more importantly, they are potent testaments of their strength, resilience, and indomitable spirit. In contemporary times, though the situation has improved with affirmative actions like reservations in education and employment, discrimination and violence against Dalits persist, particularly in rural parts of India.

The path to equality and justice is long, and it necessitates continued efforts from every sector of society. Through this thesis, we hope to shed more light on the lived experiences of Dalit women, as depicted in their autobiographies, to encourage dialogue, empathy, and active efforts toward a more inclusive society.

The structure and hierarchy of the Indian caste system, which placed the Dalits or 'untouchables' at the lowest stratum, have perpetuated severe social inequality and discrimination. "Historically deprived of fundamental rights and opportunities, the Dalits have been subjected to a long history of socio-economic and political marginalization" (Ghosh 25). Ancient Hindu legal texts, the Dharma Shastras, accepted this complex social order, dividing society into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, excluding Dalits from this caste hierarchy, often forcing them into degrading and humiliating work.

Despite untouchability being banned by the constitution in 1950, the practices of untouchability continued to affect the Dalit community and their education, work and housing and violated their basic human rights. Culturally, the Dalit community has nurtured a rich heritage of oral traditions, music, literature, and art, much of which bears the imprint of their collective struggle against caste oppression. In the "Introduction" to his *Poisoned Bread* (2009), Arjun Dangle says that Dalit literature has collective consciousness and resistance and "thus characterized by a feeling of rebellion against the establishment, of negativism and scientificity." (xxii)

"In recent years, the autobiographical narratives of Dalit women writers have become a significant part of this literary tradition, providing a gendered perspective on the experiences of caste-based oppression" (Rege 130). The struggle for Dalit rights and equality continues today, and the community's resistance against deeply entrenched prejudices and social disparities is an ongoing process. This struggle is a testament to the resilience of the Dalit community and its relentless pursuit of social justice and human dignity.

In a broader historical context, the Dalit community has seen significant changes over time. In complete socio-cultural marginalization and harsh economic conditions, Dalits gradually found ways to protect their identity and rights. Various socio-political movements led by prominent Dalit leaders and reformers were key to this change. During the Post-Independence period, we witness the birth of militant groups like the

Dalit Panther of the 1970s which fought against the atrocities of the upper class to the Dalits. “Influenced by the Black Panther Movement in the United States, the Dalit Panthers employed literature, particularly poetry and prose, as potent tools for protest and resistance. They voiced their experiences of caste atrocities and social discrimination, which profoundly impacted regional and national politics” (Omvedt 92). But in spite of these headways, the Dalits were still under the pressure and torments of the other class people especially in the village areas of India. This dark reality challenges the situation of the Dalits questioning their existence and hence, “the need for continued efforts towards social reform and equality”. (Guru 141)

The capacity of literature and the narratives cannot be ignored to give voice to the Dalits. Dalit Literature created a platform establishing a pivotal genre to express the unheard realities of the Dalits. All their narratives are lived experiences and their aims and perspectives are also different. They did it by challenging the mainstream literature of the country. It is to be noted here that the beginning of the Dalit Women’s writings significantly shows a new critical dimension to the Dalit literary genre. “Their autobiographical works provide a unique perspective into the intersectionality of caste and gender-based oppression, offering a poignant testament to their sufferings, resilience, and resistance.” (Rege 154).

In the present context, a deep dive into these autobiographical works becomes imperative to understand the layered complexities of caste and gender dynamics in Indian society. As we move forward in this book, these narratives will be analyzed in detail to bring forth the voices of Dalit women from the peripheries to the mainstream, fostering dialogue, empathy, and active efforts toward a more inclusive society. Though India is progressing more towards the modern progressive web, caste-based discrimination is still in it. Caste- based discrimination is under the modern social well-fare that influences the total social progress and it is always harmful to such a new society which is aggressive towards its modern social order. Thus, the journey towards Dalit emancipation is still an uphill task, fraught with deeply entrenched socio-economic disparities and cultural prejudices.

Furthermore, the marginalization faced by Dalits is not just a result of their caste status. Gender, too, plays a significant role in the oppression Dalits experience, especially for Dalit women who find themselves at the intersection of caste and gender

discrimination. As Rege puts it, "Dalit women face the trident of caste, class, and gender oppression" (162). These layered oppressions faced by Dalit women have often been reflected in their narratives, which is the focus of this thesis. Autobiographical accounts like Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, Bama's *Karukku*, and Viramma's *Viramma: Life of a Dalit* bring forth the Voices and experiences of Dalit women from different regional contexts. These narratives reveal the multifaceted challenges Dalit women face and their resilience in adversity.

"These women's writings are not just a recounting of personal suffering; they are potent political statements that challenge the caste hierarchy and patriarchal norms" (Kamble 23). These autobiographies underscore the importance of resistance, solidarity, and asserting identity in the face of structural violence and discrimination. Through a comparative study of the autobiographies of Dalit women from Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, this work aims to provide a detailed and nuanced analysis of their lived experiences. It seeks to underline the centrality of these voices in understanding the dynamics of caste and gender oppression in India and the continued struggle for social justice and equality. In the following chapters, we will delve into these narratives, tracing the trajectories of these women's lives as they navigate and resist the oppressive structures of caste and gender. We will examine their unique forms of protest and their journeys towards self-emancipation. Ultimately, we hope this exploration will contribute to the ongoing discourse on caste and gender dynamics in India and inspire further research and dialogue.

The significance of Dalit women's narratives goes beyond the personal. These autobiographies are a social commentary and a critique of the oppressive structures of caste and patriarchy. They provide valuable insights into the lived realities of caste-based oppression, gender discrimination, and socio-economic marginality. As noted by Pawar and Moon, these narratives "speak for those who are doubly silenced as Dalits and as women". (Pawar and Moon 68).

Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* describes the experiences of the author herself as she belongs to the Mahar community in Maharashtra. This book takes us to her journey of life that is full of gender-based atrocities and oppression and on the other hand, how she overcomes those oppressions by challenging the society. This book is not only showing her own experiences but also this is the Dalit women's experiences as a

whole. Similarly, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* gives us a vivid picture of the life of a Dalit woman in Maharashtra highlighting on issues of multiple suppressions and fights to establish their own dignity and identity and basic human rights. It is all about the courage of Dalit women against the so-called high-class society and their suppressions towards the Dalits.

In the Tamil context, Bama's *Karukku* and Viramma's *Viramma: Life of a Dalit* illuminate the lived experiences of Dalit women in Tamil Nadu. Though both the works deeply engrossed in their respective cultural and regional contexts, they are actually representatives of the universal problems of caste-based discrimination and gender bias of Indian society. They profoundly show the significance of Dalit women's voice in breaking down the age-old man-made conventions of the society and the importance of voicing their own experiences from a more lucid way. of the

The exploration of these narratives in the subsequent chapters of this book aims to foster an understanding of the complexities and nuances of caste and gender oppression in India. By centering on Dalit women's voices, the book seeks to contribute to the broader dialogue on social justice and equality. It aims to encourage empathy and incite action toward building a society where caste and gender do not determine one's life chances. This thesis recognizes and emphasizes the essential role of Dalit women's narratives in comprehending the socio-cultural dynamics of Indian society. It underlines the necessity of amplifying these marginalized voices in the ongoing struggle for justice, equality, and dignity for all. The narratives of Dalit women offer crucial insights into the interplay of caste and gender in the shaping of their identities and experiences. These autobiographies help us understand how the intersection of caste and gender creates unique forms of discrimination and challenges for Dalit women.

In examining these narratives, this thesis aims to shed light on the diverse experiences of Dalit women across different regional contexts in India. It seeks to reveal the common threads of struggle, resistance, and assertion of identity that unite these varied narratives.

The subsequent chapters of this thesis will delve deeper into these narratives, exploring themes of protest, resilience, and self-emancipation. The objective is to foster a greater understanding of the intersectional challenges faced by Dalit women and to amplify their voices in the ongoing struggle for social justice and equality.

One significant aspect of these autobiographies is the exploration of Dalit women's resistance against oppressive structures. These narratives challenge the conventional notion of Dalit women as mere victims of caste and gender oppression, revealing them as active agents of change.

For example, in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, we see how Pawar challenges the prescribed norms and expectations imposed on her as a Dalit woman. Through her determination to gain education and her career as a writer, Pawar resists the structures that seek to marginalize her, thus asserting her identity and agency. Likewise, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* stands as a story of resistance. Her autobiographical account shows her strong spirit to fight against the caste oppression and patriarchy. Her book questions the man-made caste system and at the same time shows her will of resistance and self-assertion in situate a place for herself.

Bama's *Karukku* is a poignant tale of resistance where she takes us to her life by stressing on discrimination, oppression of the Dalit women and critiques the social structures that affect the social harmony by establishing inequalities. Her work is an example of Dalit women's resilience and their determination to fight for their human rights. Similarly, Viramma's *Viramma: Life of a Dalit* is all about her resilience and courage to declare war against the caste and gender discrimination. Her story shows the Dalit women in resisting and surviving even in the severe oppressive situations in India.

These narratives of Dalit women, while revealing the grim realities of caste and gender oppression, also embody their courage, resistance, and resilience. They reflect a potent form of protest that challenges the hegemonic structures of caste and patriarchy.

The perspectives of Dalit women are crucial for a holistic understanding of caste and gender dynamics in Indian society. These women bear the brunt of intersectional discrimination based on both their caste and gender, making their experiences unique and their voices indispensable for any meaningful discourse on social justice and equality.

The narratives of Dalit women, as expressed in their autobiographies, offer invaluable insights into these lived realities. As Kamble powerfully articulates in her memoir *The Prisons We Broke*, "Our lives are our history, and our history is the history of our society" (Kamble 152). This statement underscores the significance of Dalit women's experiences as a reflection of the broader societal structures and dynamics.



Furthermore, Urmila Pawar, in *The Weave of My Life*, emphasizes the importance of representation and visibility of Dalit women in literature: "Our stories are not just our stories, they are the stories of countless women who suffer silently under the yoke of caste and patriarchy" (Pawar137). Her narrative accentuates the necessity of amplifying these voices to challenge the pervasive silences surrounding the experiences of Dalit women.

In *Karukku*, Bama asserts, "In my life, I have not had any wealth to count as my own except my stories" (Bama 165). Her poignant statement underlines the crucial role of these narratives as a medium of resistance and assertion of identity for Dalit women. Viramma, in her autobiography *Viramma: Life of a Dalit*, states, "We are not mere victims; we are fighters" (185). This statement encapsulates the spirit of resistance and resilience embodied by Dalit women in their struggle against caste and gender oppression.

As we delve deeper into the narratives of Dalit women, it becomes clear that their experiences of oppression are not isolated incidents but part of a broader systemic issue. As Anand Teltumbde points out in his seminal work, *The Persistence of Caste (2010)*, "Caste is a systemic and structural form of discrimination that shapes every aspect of a Dalit's life" (76). This perspective is further supported by Gopal Guru, a well-known scholar on Dalit studies in his work *Atrophy in Dalit Politics (2005)*, where he states, "Dalits do not live their lives in compartments but experience caste oppression in its totality" (88). This holistic understanding of caste oppression is crucial for a nuanced analysis of the narratives of Dalit women.

Regarding the theme of resistance, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her book *Feminism without Borders (2003)* says that Women are not passive recipients of oppression, but active participants in their own liberation (112). This thought resonates powerfully with the narratives of resistance and self-emancipation by Dalit women.

Furthermore, the sociologist Sharmila Rege, in her book *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, underlines the importance of such narratives: "Dalit women's testimonies are not mere tales of victimhood, but powerful narratives of resistance, challenging both caste and gender hierarchies" (94).

These quotes from different authors further underline the relevance and importance of exploring the narratives of Dalit women. They serve as critical

supplements to our understanding of the intricate dynamics of caste, gender, and resistance. Dalit women's narratives are not just reflections of their individual experiences; they also provide valuable insights into the societal structures that perpetuate caste and gender oppression. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asserts in her influential essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) "The subaltern has no history and cannot speak; the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (83). However, these Dalit women, through their narratives, challenge this notion, boldly asserting their histories and speaking their truths. Noted sociologist Gail Omvedt, in her book *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-Caste Intellectuals* (2023), emphasizes the transformative power of such narratives: "Dalit women's stories are not just stories; they are also tools for change, for imagining a world free of caste and gender hierarchies" (212).

In the context of the theme of self-emancipation, bell hooks, in her book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (2014) posits that "To be truly liberated, one must confront the structures of oppression and work towards their dismantlement" (85). This is mirrored in the journeys of self-emancipation undertaken by the Dalit women in the autobiographies we are examining.

Ambedkar's famous quote, "I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved"(237), underscores the significance of the empowerment of Dalit women as a crucial barometer for the progress of the Dalit community as a whole.

The narratives of Dalit women serve not just as personal memoirs but as powerful critiques of societal structures. Their stories of suffering, protest, and self-emancipation are testaments to their resilience and resistance, offering a critical lens to examine and understand the intricate dynamics of caste and gender oppression. The Dalit women writers in these narratives not only chronicle their experiences of suffering and protest but also shed light on the collective struggle for social justice and equality. The centrality of their records underscores the importance of including diverse perspectives to ensure a nuanced understanding of social issues.

This is further emphasized by postcolonial theorist Edward Said in his influential book *Orientalism* (1979). Said states, "Without the voices of the marginalized, our

understanding of the world remains incomplete" (66). Said's assertion reinforces the importance of amplifying marginalized voices, such as those of Dalit women.

Moreover, feminist scholar Judith Butler, in her seminal book *Gender Trouble* (1990), provides insights that resonate with the experiences of Dalit women. She writes, "Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original, and it is through the matrix of gender that one becomes a viable subject" (137). This insight is particularly relevant when we consider the intersectionality of caste and gender oppression that Dalit women face.

Ambedkar's *Against the Madness of Manu*, (2013) emphasizes, "The intersectionality of caste and gender needs to be central to any discourse on social justice" (124). This speaks to the layered oppression that Dalit women face and the necessity to address both these dimensions to achieve social justice.

The narratives of Dalit women serve as a stark reminder of the pervasive inequality in society. Yet, they also stand as a testament to resilience, resistance, and the unyielding quest for dignity and justice. Their voices, far from being silent, ring out loud and clear, challenging the status quo and demanding change. Dalit women's autobiographies serve as powerful voices of protest. They challenge the oppressive caste and gender hierarchies and assert their rightful place in society. Literary critic Gayatri Spivak's assertion in her work, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), is pertinent in this context. She states, "Subaltern voices, when heard, can disrupt the dominant discourses of power"(287). This idea is embodied in the narratives of the Dalit women who, through their memoirs, disrupt the dominant discourse of caste and patriarchy.

A similar view is espoused by theorist Homi K. Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* (2004). Bhabha contends that "Marginalized voices, when they find expression, disturb the symmetrical structure of the dominant culture" (155). This observation aligns with the disruption caused by Dalit women's narratives in the mainstream discourse.

In his work *Caste Matters* (2019), Suraj Yengde, a scholar of caste studies, underscores the empowering effect of such narratives. He writes, "Narratives of the oppressed are potent weapons that challenge the hegemony of the oppressor" (91). This underlines the subversive power of Dalit women's memoirs.

The final yet crucial aspect of the Dalit women's narrative is their journey towards self-emancipation. Their stories are a testament to the power of the human spirit to survive and thrive against all odds. In her groundbreaking book *The Second Sex* (2011), feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir writes, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (295). This quote reflects the transformative journeys of Dalit women who, through struggle and resistance, redefine their identities beyond the confines of caste and gender norms.

Audre Lorde, in her book *Sister Outsider* (1984), gives voice to the transformative potential of such narratives: "Telling our stories, first to ourselves and then to one another and the world, is a revolutionary act" (41). This thought echoes in the lives of Dalit women as they take charge of their own narratives and, in the process, pave the way for their self-emancipation.

A similar sentiment is echoed by bell hooks in her book *Talking Back* (1989) where she contends, "Speaking is not merely an act of verbalization; it can be a revolutionary act of self-affirmation" (12). These narratives indeed serve as an act of self-affirmation for Dalit women, affirming their identities beyond the oppressive caste and gender norms.

Thus, the narratives of Dalit women are not just personal memoirs or social critiques. They are also transformative journeys of self-emancipation, illustrating the power of resilience and resistance in the face of structural oppression. The in-depth analysis of these autobiographies from Dalit women writers provides a unique perspective into the intricacies of caste and gender in Indian society. The narratives illuminate the brutal realities of the caste system and its influence on the lived experiences of Dalit women.

Yet, these narratives are not solely tales of suffering; they are a testament to the power of resistance and the pursuit of self-emancipation. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty, a distinguished feminist scholar says that the stories of struggle and resistance can offer a blueprint for a transformative politics that respects difference and acknowledges the legitimacy of diverse experiences. (79).

These autobiographies also challenge the notion of the 'monolithic' Dalit experience. As prominent caste scholar Anand Teltumbde states in *Mahad: The Making of the First Dalit Revolt*(2016), "There are as many Dalit experiences as there are Dalits.

The diversity of their experiences challenges the dominant discourse on caste and forces us to rethink our assumptions". (105)

In Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste: A Memoir (2003)*, he chronicles his family's fight against the caste system and their upward mobility, affirming that "In the fight for dignity, every step forward counts" (188). Jadhav's narrative highlights the profound impact of education and resistance in challenging the deeply entrenched caste hierarchies.

Each of these narratives enriches our understanding of the diverse experiences of marginalized communities in India. They illustrate the intersections of caste, gender, tribal identity, and sexual orientation, pushing us to rethink our assumptions about these communities. Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble (1990)*, argues, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (33). This argument forces us to reconsider our notions of identity and to understand how caste, gender, tribal identity, and sexual orientation can intersect and shape lived experiences in complex ways.

Furthermore, the act of telling one's story is not merely a recollection of personal experiences; it is a political act of resistance and a quest for recognition. As Michel Foucault states in *The History of Sexuality (1990)*, "Where there is power, there is resistance" (95). These narratives, therefore, become powerful tools of resistance, challenging the dominant discourse and fighting for recognition and representation.

Consequently, these narratives remind us that the struggle for social justice and equality is far from over. The path to change may be long and fraught, but it is true that the ways to the human universe is not trodden: it will lead us to the absolute justice. The heterogeneity of these narratives breaks the homogenizing portrayal of marginalized communities. It underlines how different sociocultural contexts shape varied experiences. In *The Location of Culture (2004)*, postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha points out, "Cultural identity... is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (1). Bhabha's insight encourages us to view these autobiographies as ongoing narratives of 'becoming,' each unique yet interconnected through shared struggles against oppressive social structures.

These autobiographies also push readers to question and dismantle the hierarchical structures that marginalize and disenfranchise these communities. They embody Paulo Freire's concept of critical consciousness, as expounded in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), where he asserts, "To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it" (88). The act of narrating one's experiences in these autobiographies is a decisive step towards naming and transforming the world, pushing for a more equitable social order.

The background of this study lies in the exploration and analysis of the autobiographies of several notable Dalit women writers, focusing on their distinct socio-cultural and historical contexts. Dalits, formerly referred to as 'untouchables,' occupy the lowest rank in the caste hierarchy in India and have long been subjected to systemic oppression, social exclusion, and economic marginalization. This exclusion extends to the realm of literature, where their voices and narratives have historically been silenced or overlooked.

However, the last few decades have seen a surge in Dalit literature. This body of work presents an essential counter-narrative to mainstream Indian literature, highlighting the lived realities, struggles, and aspirations of Dalit communities. Dalit women's autobiographies are especially significant as they intersect caste and gender, thereby presenting a unique perspective on the double discrimination faced by Dalit women.

This study will focus on four autobiographies: Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2019), Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2018), Bama's *Karukku* (2019), and Viramma's *Viramma: Life of a Dalit* (1998). These autobiographies not only recount personal life experiences but also act as vital socio-political commentaries on the condition of Dalit women in India.

The backdrop to these narratives ranges from the rural landscapes of Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra to the urban milieu. The comparative study of these texts will provide an understanding of how socio-cultural dynamics shape the lived experiences of Dalit women in different regional contexts.

In addition to their historical and socio-cultural analysis, these texts also reflect the authors' self-assertion and resistance against the societal structures that seek to

marginalize them. The narratives challenge the conventional perception of Dalit women as passive victims, instead portraying them as active agents of change.

The specific focus on these four autobiographies also stems from their representative diversity. The texts, written initially in Marathi and Tamil, provide a comparative perspective on the Dalit women's experiences in two different states of India: Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. Both regions have distinct sociocultural contexts, yet they intersect on shared experiences of caste-based discrimination and gender bias.

Further, the historical backdrop of these narratives spans several decades, from the pre-independence era, marked by entrenched caste hierarchies and colonial influence, to the post-independence period of socio-political change and emerging Dalit consciousness. This allows the study to explore how these narratives have evolved over time, reflecting the changing socio-political landscape and the evolving discourse on Dalit rights and identity.

The background of this study is also shaped by a broader literary and academic context. While Dalit literature has gained recognition in recent decades, there remains a need for more nuanced and diverse analyses. In particular, there has been a lack of focus on Dalit women's narratives, which offer unique insights into the intersectionality of caste and gender. This study seeks to address this gap, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of Dalit literature and experiences.

Moreover, these autobiographies are not just personal memoirs; they are a potent form of social and political commentary. By studying these texts, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on social justice, equality, and human rights, in the context of India's complex caste and gender dynamics.

Overall, the background of this study is deeply intertwined with the lived experiences of Dalit women, the historical and socio-cultural realities of the Dalit community, and the broader discourse on social justice and equality in India.

The caste system in India is a complex socio-economic and political hierarchy that has dictated the social structure of the society for centuries. Historically, the system has been defined by four main classes or 'Varnas': Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and farmers), and Shudras (servants and labourers). Outside this four-fold division were the Dalits, often referred to as the 'untouchables' or the 'outcasts' (Dirks 27).

In this rigid hierarchy, Dalits were marginalized and subjected to severe forms of discrimination, often relegated to performing menial and degrading tasks. Ambedkar, a notable Dalit leader and the architect of the Indian constitution, once remarked, "Untouchability is far worse than slavery, for the latter may be abolished by statute. It will take more than laws to remove this stigma from the people of India" (Zelliot 49).

Dalit women, in particular, experienced this discrimination twofold due to their caste and gender. They were often victims of violence, denied access to education, and exploited economically. As scholar Sharmila Rege noted, "Dalit women's position at the bottom of caste, class, and gender hierarchies, combined with a lack of resources, have made them more vulnerable to various forms of discrimination and violence" (Rege 79).

Yet, despite these oppressive conditions, Dalit women have demonstrated incredible resilience and agency, persistently challenging the socio-cultural norms imposed upon them. Their voices, echoed through their autobiographical narratives, have served as powerful testimonies of their lived experiences and struggle for emancipation.

Dalit women's experiences are informed not just by their caste but also by their gender, making them victims of what is often termed as 'double discrimination.' This intersection of caste and gender provides them with a unique perspective on the oppressive societal structure. "For Dalit women, life is a continuous fight against the dual varna or caste oppression and gender discrimination". (Teltumbde 111).

The profoundly ingrained caste-based division of labour in India further exacerbates the condition of Dalit women, who often find themselves at the most disadvantaged end of this hierarchy. They are typically employed in low-paying, labor-intensive jobs and are frequently denied fundamental human rights. As per Ruth Manorama, a notable Dalit rights activist, "The traditional caste-based occupation of Dalit women is an expression of their social position and power relations in society. It represents a life of exploitation, physical and sexual violence, and extreme forms of untouchability practices" (Kumar 58).

Despite these harsh realities, Dalit women have consistently raised their voices against this oppressive system, challenging the status quo and asserting their identity and rights. Their autobiographies, like those examined in this study, provide an



insightful window into their lived experiences, their struggles, and their journey towards self-emancipation.

Even within the broad spectrum of feminist movements in India, the unique and nuanced experiences of Dalit women have often been sidelined or overlooked. Dalit women's experiences are distinct due to the intersection of caste and gender-based oppression they face, making their struggle for equality a fight on two fronts. Uma Chakravarti, in her *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (2003), reflects on this reality stating, "The social experience of caste in India has a strong gendered and sexualized dimension, which is nowhere more evident than in the lives of Dalit women" (34).

Despite this, Dalit women's narratives are marked not just by oppression but also by resistance. Their autobiographies often serve as a form of protest, challenging the orthodox Brahminical patriarchy and caste hierarchies. It is found that the autobiographies by the Dalit women writers though represent the Dalit life, they are also strong and powerful political documents showing the existence of Dalits as same human beings like the other.

One cannot overlook the importance of education in the lives of these Dalit women. Despite facing extreme forms of discrimination and physical violence, they navigated the oppressive socio-cultural structures to gain access to education. Many Dalit women writers, like Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble, underscored the transformative power of education in their lives. Kamble, in her autobiography, noted, "Education was not merely a tool for economic progress; it was a means for us to understand our own lives, our position in society, and the systemic mechanisms of oppression" (122).

Simultaneously, these Dalit women also recognized the limitations of formal education, which often carried Brahminical biases. They highlighted how Dalit histories and voices were erased or misrepresented in mainstream narratives. Bama, a prominent Dalit woman writer, powerfully critiques this exclusion in her autobiography *Karukku*, stating, "They have so contrived to present us in a poor light, so distorted the facts of our lives, that they have completely erased our true identities" (71).

Beyond the realm of education, Dalit women also grappled with the socio-economic realities of their lives. They often occupied the most marginalized and

impoverished strata of society, exploited as manual labourers or employed in degrading occupations. Viramma, in her autobiography, vividly depicted the daily hardships she faced as an agricultural labourer, a position she was relegated to due to her caste status. She states that for them, life is always a war. Every morning there is new problem, new challenge and new hardship. But still, they find pleasure of doing mean impure works showing their humanity against all sufferings of life.

At the same time, Dalit women were also instrumental in shaping the socio-political landscape of India. They were not just passive victims of their circumstances but active participants in their own destiny and the more significant Dalit movement for social justice. As Gopal Guru asserts, "Dalit women were not merely recipients of reform; they were also agents of change in their own right. They challenged the societal norms, protested against injustices, and became torchbearers of the Dalit emancipation movement" (44).

In their narratives, Dalit women provide a unique insight into their lived experiences, bridging the personal with the political. They vividly depict their journey from being the 'other' to assert their identity as human beings deserving dignity, respect, and equal rights. Through this study, we delve into these profound narratives, bringing to the fore the voices that have long been sidelined in the discourse on caste and gender in India. Dalit women's experiences are further layered with regional disparities. The caste dynamics and socio-cultural practices vary significantly across different regions in India, influencing the lived experiences of Dalit women. The study, therefore, consciously includes autobiographies written in both Marathi and Tamil languages, providing a comparative perspective on the lives of Dalit women in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.

As Mungekar noted, "The experiences of Dalits are not homogenous across India. The regional variations in caste practices further complicate the caste dynamics. Therefore, the narrative of Dalit women from Maharashtra could be significantly different from those in Tamil Nadu" (132). This regional divergence in experiences is central to understanding the complexity and diversity of Dalit women's lives.

The importance of translation in this context cannot be understated. The English translations of these regional narratives, undertaken by scholars like Maya Pandit, Lakshmi Holmstrom, and Will Hobson, have played a critical role in making these

narratives accessible to a global audience. As Spivak observes, "Translation is a crucial tool in ensuring that these marginalized voices are heard in the global discourse" (383).

The purpose of this study is to set the stage for a subtle understanding of the experiences of Dalit women as depicted in their autobiographies. By examining their narratives against the socio-cultural and historical backdrops of their lives, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of their sufferings, protests, and self-assertions, illuminating their journey towards self-emancipation.

Beyond caste and gender discrimination, Dalit women also experience religious discrimination. In her autobiography, *The Weave of My Life*, Urmila Pawar narrates incidents where her spiritual identity as a Buddhist (after converting from Hinduism along with many other Dalits, led by B.R. Ambedkar) was a further reason for her marginalization. She noted, "I was marked not just by my caste, but also by my religion. We were a minority within a minority" (Pawar 52).

These various forms of discrimination intersect to create a unique struggle for Dalit women. However, it is important to emphasize that their narratives are not solely about suffering and marginalization but also about resilience and resistance. As Baby Kamble asserted in *The Prisons We Broke*, "Our lives were not just about oppression. We resisted, we fought, we survived, and we continue to do so. Each day, in our own ways, we challenged the system that sought to break us" (67).

Therefore, the central thread running through the forthcoming chapters of this study is the exploration of the resilience of Dalit women in the face of multi-layered discrimination. Their autobiographies document their experiences of oppression, their acts of resistance, and their journey toward self-emancipation. It is through these narratives that we gain a deeper understanding of the complex and multifaceted reality of Dalit women in India.

The study of Dalit women's autobiographies is not just an academic exercise but a recognition and validation of their lives, their struggles, and their aspirations. As Bama, in her autobiography *Karukku*, reminds us, "Each word, each sentence we write is part of our fight for justice. Our narratives are our weapons, our shields" (76).

The words of these Dalit women are a testament to their spirit of resistance and their fight for dignity and equality. Their narratives transcend the personal and become a potent tool of socio-political protest. In writing their lives, they challenge the systemic

oppression and the dominant narratives that have sought to silence and marginalize them.

It is important to note that Dalit women's autobiographies are not just about recording their lives. As Viramma highlights in her life narrative, "We do not write for pity. We write for recognition. We write to tell the world that we exist, that we resist, and that we demand justice" (85).

The socio-political climate in India, especially since the advent of British colonial rule and, later, the nation's independence, played a significant role in the emergence of Dalit literature. Historically, Dalits were excluded from mainstream education and, consequently, from literary traditions. The British education policy in India, despite its numerous flaws, did offer some Dalits an opportunity to receive formal education, breaking the age-old monopoly of the upper castes on knowledge and learning.

This newfound access to education, coupled with growing awareness of social justice and human rights, led to the emergence of Dalit literature as a distinct genre in the mid-20th century. Sharan Kumar Limbale, a prominent Dalit writer, aptly observes, "Dalit literature is not merely literature; it is associated with a movement to bring social and political change" (45).

Dalit literature, thus, emerged as a powerful tool for protest against the oppressive caste system. It provided a platform for Dalits to voice their sufferings, struggles, and aspirations and to challenge the hegemony of the upper-caste narratives. Dalit writings were characterized by their raw honesty, fierce resistance, and their assertion of Dalit identity.

The autobiographies of Dalit women have played a significant role in this literary tradition. Despite facing 'double discrimination' - on the grounds of both caste and gender - Dalit women have used the medium of autobiography to narrate their unique experiences. These autobiographies serve not just as personal memoirs but as socio-political statements challenging the prevailing caste and gender hierarchies and asserting Dalit women's identities as equal human beings.

With the passage of time, Dalit literature has evolved, but it continues to be a tool for protest and assertion of identity. As this study will show in the subsequent chapters, the autobiographies of Dalit women writers like Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Bama,

and Viramma offer valuable insights into their lives, their struggles against the oppressive socio-cultural structures, and their journey towards self-emancipation.

Post-independence, as India was grappling with building a democratic nation, the socio-political landscape was gradually evolving. A growing consciousness about social justice and equality was taking root. Dalits, who had been marginalized for centuries, started to find their voices in the political arena. The Constitution of India, adopted in 1950, guaranteed equality and prohibited discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. These developments, coupled with the social reform movements spearheaded by visionary leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, provided an impetus to the Dalit movement for equality and social justice. It was in this climate that Dalit literature began to flourish as a distinct genre.

Dalit literature, as a tool of protest and assertion, offered a stark contrast to mainstream literary traditions. It unabashedly portrayed the harsh realities of Dalit lives, their sufferings under the oppressive caste system, and their resistance against these injustices. As Omvedt notes, "Dalit literature broke the silence about caste atrocities. It challenged the romantic, idealized representation of rural India in mainstream literature" (124).

The voices of Dalit women added another layer to this elite literary tradition. Despite being relegated to the margins, Dalit women writers used the medium of literature to challenge their double marginalization - both as women and as Dalits. Their autobiographies, such as those by Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Bama, and Viramma, weave together personal narratives with the socio-political reality of their times, shedding light on their journey of self-emancipation.

This study will explore these autobiographies in-depth, elucidating how they reflect and respond to the socio-political climate of their time. In the following chapters, we will delve into these narratives, unraveling the threads of their suffering, their protest, and their assertion of identity.

The political consciousness in Dalit literature, especially the autobiographies of Dalit women, mirrors the broader Dalit movement for social justice and equality. The political engagement of Dalit writers, and their reflections on contemporary socio-political issues, is an integral part of their literary oeuvre.

The self-assertion of Dalit identity in these works was not merely an act of resistance but also a political statement. For instance, in her autobiography *Karukku*, Bama narrates her journey of self-realization, where she consciously chooses to embrace her Dalit identity and uses it as a tool for political mobilization. She states, "My Dalit identity is not a mark of shame, but a badge of honour, a symbol of resistance" (97).

Moreover, Dalit literature also critiques the prevailing socio-political structures and advocated for radical change. Urmila Pawar, in *The Weave of My Life*, vehemently criticizes the systemic inequality ingrained in the caste system and calls for a socio-political revolution. She asserts, "Our fight is not just for survival, but for a total transformation of society" (Pawar and Pandit 103).

The protest and assertion in Dalit literature had a two-fold purpose: It aimed to expose the oppressive structures of the caste system and to challenge the dominant narratives that perpetuated such systems. The subsequent chapters of this study will delve deeper into these aspects, exploring how Dalit women, through their autobiographies, engage with the socio-political climate of their times and use literature as a tool for protest and assertion of their identity.

These autobiographies also highlight the role of Dalit women as change-makers in their communities. Despite facing social and economic challenges, these women led the way in challenging oppressive practices and creating spaces for dialogue and reform. In *The Prisons We Broke*; Baby Kamble narrates instances where she mobilized women in her community to fight against caste-based discrimination. She recalls, "We knew that change had to come from within us. We, the women, had to be the torchbearers of this transformation" (125).

Similarly, Viramma's autobiography showcases her journey from being a victim of untouchability to becoming an activist who fought for the rights of her community. "I was not just a mute spectator. I resisted, I organized, I demanded justice," she states (112).

Such narratives provide a glimpse into the agency of Dalit women in shaping their socio-political environments. They demonstrate how Dalit women, through their lived experiences and struggles, have contributed to the broader Dalit movement for social justice and equality. Dalit women in India face a unique set of challenges rooted in the

intersection of caste and gender discrimination. These challenges are manifold and affect every aspect of their lives, from education and employment to health and personal safety.

Dalit women are often trapped in a cycle of poverty and low-status employment. According to the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), the majority of Dalit women are employed in the informal sector, with many engaged in manual scavenging, a degrading and hazardous occupation (NSSO 65).

As far as the provision to education is concerned, it becomes a challenge for the Dalit women. The literacy rate among the Dalits is not satisfactory. They are not even allowed to complete the secondary education because of their utterly miserable plights such as poverty, child marriage, discrimination at schools. Dalit women face stark health disparities due to inadequate access to healthcare services and sanitary facilities, malnutrition, and occupational hazards. The pre and post pregnancy mortality rate is surprisingly high among Dalits.

Dalit women are particularly vulnerable to gender and caste-based violence, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, and assault. They also face institutional discrimination from the police and judiciary, making it difficult for them to seek justice (Human Rights Watch Report, 134). Socially they are excluded and forced to live in the outskirts of villages and they are also denied the accessibility to the temples, tubewells or public places. Dalit women often face systemic barriers that prevent them from accessing resources and opportunities. These structural barriers can be seen in the way society is organized and, in the attitudes, and behaviours of people that perpetuate inequality and discrimination.

For example, the Panchayat Raj Institutions, though thought to be the platforms for social security or justice are actually seen a failure as they are also not adequately addressed the issues of the Dalits and Dalit women as a whole. While the Indian constitution guarantees political representation for Dalits through the reservation of seats, Dalit women's representation in political bodies remains disproportionately low. “This political marginalization further prevents their issues from being adequately addressed at the policy level.” (Pai 113).

“Cultural stereotypes and stigmatization also play a significant role in the oppression of Dalit women. They are often portrayed in derogatory ways in popular

culture and media, which further entrenches discrimination and biases against them.” (Guru 178). To overcome these challenges, it's essential not just to reform laws and policies but also to challenge and change deeply ingrained societal attitudes and behaviours. Education, awareness, and advocacy, along with the amplification of Dalit women's voices, are crucial in this regard. Dalit women's experiences are unique due to the intersection of caste and gender oppression they face. They suffer not just from caste discrimination but also from gender-based violence and subjugation, both within and outside their communities. This intersectionality creates a complex web of oppression that distinguishes their experiences from those of upper-caste women and Dalit men.

While upper-caste women face gender-based discrimination, they also benefit from their higher caste status. Dalit women, however, endure dual marginalization – both as women and as members of a historically disadvantaged caste. Upper-caste women are often complicit in the caste-based discrimination and violence inflicted on Dalit women. Upper-caste women have had more access to education, health services, and employment opportunities, giving them a degree of social and economic mobility. Dalit women, however, continue to be marginalized in these areas due to their caste status, despite legal provisions for equal rights and opportunities.

While Dalit men face caste-based discrimination, they do not experience the same level of gender-based violence and subjugation as Dalit women. Dalit men, even though marginalized, can still exercise patriarchal power within their homes and communities. They can perpetuate gender-based violence and discrimination against Dalit women, adding another layer of oppression. Moreover, Dalit women are often the targets of sexual violence by upper-caste men, used as a tool to assert caste dominance and reinforce social hierarchies. This exposes them to a specific form of violence that Dalit men are generally not subjected to.

"Dalit women, doubly marginalized, are the victims of a collision of deep-rooted gender and caste discrimination, resulting in them constituting one of the most socially undervalued and legally disregarded sectors of Indian society." (Kumar 110). Women are always sub-humanized since time immemorial. In the case of the Dalit women, they are tormented for different reasons: first, that they are women forming the universal category of oppression; secondly, they are the Dalit women and for them, there is no system of justice and thirdly they are also tortured by their own male counterparts inside



their own households. So, they have the dual burden as the women and the Dalit women. This is not because of the patriarchal culture of the Indian society but also for the “entrenched and structured hierarchy determined by caste” (Jain 212). Here, one can easily look into the intersectionality of gender and caste-based discrimination faced by Dalit women.

Yet, the Dalit women are not only passive listeners to the dictations of the society now. Actually, they formed one of the most influential social movements in India by challenging these oppressive structures. These women are not only the victims now, they are strong social milestones who have the courage to make their voices heard. This makes sense to mention that the Dalit women have their resistance and courage to write their own story of their own.

“Dalit women have their unique life experiences, which are very different from those of upper-caste women and Dalit men. They have developed their forms of resistance and ways of coping. Listening to their voices will provide us with new insights and understandings” (Ilaiah 96). In this statement, Kancha Ilaiah emphasizes the importance of recognizing and understanding the unique life experiences of Dalit women.

The exploration of these autobiographies and their contextual analysis provides a deeper understanding of the unique challenges Dalit women face. However, it also emphasizes their agency and highlights the importance of their voices in disrupting oppressive structures and fostering social change. These selected four Dalit women authors -- Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Bama, and Viramma -- have given voice to the struggles, resistance, and aspirations of Dalit women through their compelling autobiographical narratives. Their works not only reveal the harsh realities of caste and gender-based discrimination in India but also highlight the resilience and courage of Dalit women.

The autobiographies of Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Bama, and Viramma were written at a time when Dalit literature was emerging as a potent voice of resistance against the social injustice and discrimination perpetrated by the Indian caste system. Each of these works provides an account of the author's personal experiences of caste and gender oppression, thereby contributing to the discourse of Dalit and feminist literature.

These works were initially met with resistance from mainstream society for their stark criticism of the deeply entrenched caste system. However, they have since been recognized for their critical importance in Indian literature, contributing significantly to the discourses of Dalit literature and feminist literature. These works also played a crucial role in making visible the often-overlooked experiences and struggles of Dalit women, thereby giving a much-needed impetus to Dalit feminism.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

The main aim of this thesis is to explore and understand the lived experiences, struggles, resistance, and identity formation of Dalit women as depicted in the selected autobiographies. The book seeks to highlight the voices of Dalit women authors who, through their autobiographies, provide a unique insight into the intersectionality of caste and gender discrimination. It aims to analyze these works against the backdrop of socio-cultural and historical aspects of Dalit lives in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, thus enabling a comparative study of the two regions.

The research questions guiding the thesis include:

1. How do the selected autobiographies represent the socio-cultural and historical experiences of Dalit women in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu?
2. What themes of struggle, protest, and self-assertion emerge from these works, and how do they contribute to the discourse of Dalit and feminist literature?
3. How do the autobiographies portray the intersectionality of caste and gender discrimination faced by Dalit women?
4. How do these narratives illustrate the journey of Dalit women toward self-emancipation and identity formation?
5. How do these works reflect upon and challenge the mainstream understanding of Dalit lives and experiences?

Through this exploration, the book intends to contribute to the discourse of Dalit literature and feminism and seeks to underline the importance of including Dalit women's narratives in mainstream academic and literary discourse. This thesis seeks to make significant contributions to Dalit literature, feminist scholarship, and social understanding of caste and gender oppression in several ways.

Firstly, in terms of Dalit literature, this book provides an in-depth analysis of four poignant Dalit women's autobiographies. By shedding light on these works, the work contributes to the growing corpus of Dalit literature that challenges mainstream narratives and asserts the unique lived experiences of the Dalit community. It also expands the regional focus of Dalit literature by offering a comparative analysis of the experiences of Dalit women in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.

Secondly, the thesis contributes to feminist scholarship by foregrounding the intersectional experiences of Dalit women who face oppression not only due to their caste but also their gender. This intersectional approach deepens the understanding of gender oppression by accounting for caste as a significant factor influencing women's experiences in India. It thus enhances feminist scholarship by incorporating nuanced insights of marginalized women's experiences.

Thirdly, from a social perspective, this work contributes to a more comprehensive and solid understanding of caste and gender oppression. By sharing the often-ignored stories of Dalit women, the thesis challenges mainstream social narratives and provides insight into the everyday realities of those living at the margins of society. It highlights the need for social change and paves the way for a more inclusive understanding of diverse experiences.

Moreover, this thesis, by focusing on the autobiographies of Dalit women, makes essential contributions to Dalit literature, feminist scholarship, and social understanding. It emphasizes the power of personal narratives in challenging societal norms and forging paths toward greater equality and justice.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:**

**Intersectionality in Feminist Scholarship:** By focusing on the experiences of Dalit women, the study contributes to the understanding of intersectionality in feminist scholarship. The intersection of caste and gender presents unique challenges that are often overlooked in mainstream feminist discourses. This study underscores the need for a more inclusive feminism that addresses these challenges.

**Contribution to Dalit Literature:** The analysis of autobiographies of Dalit women writers enriches Dalit literature by providing a comprehensive exploration of the struggles, resistance, and self-assertion of Dalit women. It also highlights the importance of autobiographical narratives as a form of self-expression and resistance.

**Regional Variations:** The comparative study of Dalit women's experiences in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu contributes to our understanding of the regional variations in caste and gender oppression. This has implications for policy interventions and social initiatives, emphasizing the need for context-specific strategies.

**Social Understanding:** By bringing the narratives of Dalit women into the mainstream, the study contributes to social understanding of caste and gender issues. It promotes empathy, awareness, and a more nuanced understanding of the realities of marginalization.

**Policy Implications:** The insights from this study can inform policy-making related to caste and gender issues. It can guide the formulation of inclusive policies that effectively address the specific challenges faced by Dalit women.

**Future Research:** By uncovering new aspects of Dalit women's experiences, this study also paves the way for future research in this area. It opens up new avenues for exploring and understanding the intersection of caste, gender, and regional variations.

## RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY:

In the contemporary socio-political scenario, the relevance of this book is manifold. The global discourse on rights, equality, and social justice increasingly recognizes the need to include the voices of marginalized communities, and this work contributes to this endeavour by focusing on the narratives of Dalit women in India.

The thesis provides invaluable insights into the lived realities of Dalit women, who often face the brunt of intersecting caste and gender oppressions. By exploring their autobiographies, it brings to the fore their struggles and resistance, giving a voice to their experiences in a society that often overlooks them. This can contribute to

ongoing discourses on social justice by highlighting the need for more inclusive policies that consider the unique challenges faced by marginalized communities.

The comparative study of Marathi and Tamil Dalit women's narratives furthers our understanding of the cultural and regional diversity of these experiences. This is particularly relevant at a time when India is grappling with regional disparities in development and social indicators. The findings of this work can inform policy-making, ensuring that it is sensitive to regional and cultural differences and is geared towards addressing the specific challenges faced by Dalit women in different parts of the country.

The thesis will contribute to the feminist discourse by highlighting the intersectionality of caste and gender oppression. It challenges the mainstream feminist movement to consider and address the unique struggles faced by Dalit women and in doing so, pushes towards a more inclusive feminism. In a socio-political climate that is increasingly recognizing the need for diversity, inclusivity, and intersectionality, this work provides timely and necessary insights. By giving a platform to the voices of Dalit women, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of social oppression and paves the way for more inclusive social change.

The texts selected for this thesis – *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar, *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble, *Karukku* by Bama, and *Viramma: Life of a Dalit* by Viramma – represent a diverse range of experiences and perspectives from Dalit women writers across different regions in India. These texts are selected because they are written by Dalit women themselves, ensuring that their experiences are presented first-hand. This gives the reader a deeper, more intimate understanding of the realities of Dalit women's lives. These works were chosen because they provide an opportunity to examine the experiences of Dalit women in different regional and cultural contexts within India. With Pawar and Kamble's results based in Maharashtra and Bama and Viramma's in Tamil Nadu, these texts offer a comparative study of Dalit women's life in these two regions.

Each of these texts provides unique perspectives on the intersection of caste and gender in India. They not only discuss the discrimination faced due to their Dalit identity but also explore the additional layers of gender-based discrimination within their communities and the wider society. These books have been influential in the field of

Dalit literature. They have been widely acknowledged for their impactful narratives that have shifted the discourse around Dalit lives and experiences, making them significant works for analysis. The selection of these autobiographies allows for a comprehensive and redefined analysis of Dalit women's lives and struggles, contributing to the discourse of Dalit literature, feminist literature, and intersectionality.

#### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

1. To critically analyse selected autobiographies of Dalit women writers
2. To contextualize these narratives within the larger socio-cultural and historical contexts of Dalit life in India, especially within the regions of Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.
3. To Highlight the Intersection of Caste and Gender
4. To draw comparisons between the experiences of Dalit women in different linguistic and cultural contexts
5. To contribute to the growing body of Dalit literature and feminist scholarship by adding to the discourse on the experiences of Dalit women.
6. To use the insights from the analysis to inform social understanding and policy-making related to caste and gender issues